VE STORIES OF THE REAL WEST

RANCH ROMANCES

Second September Number

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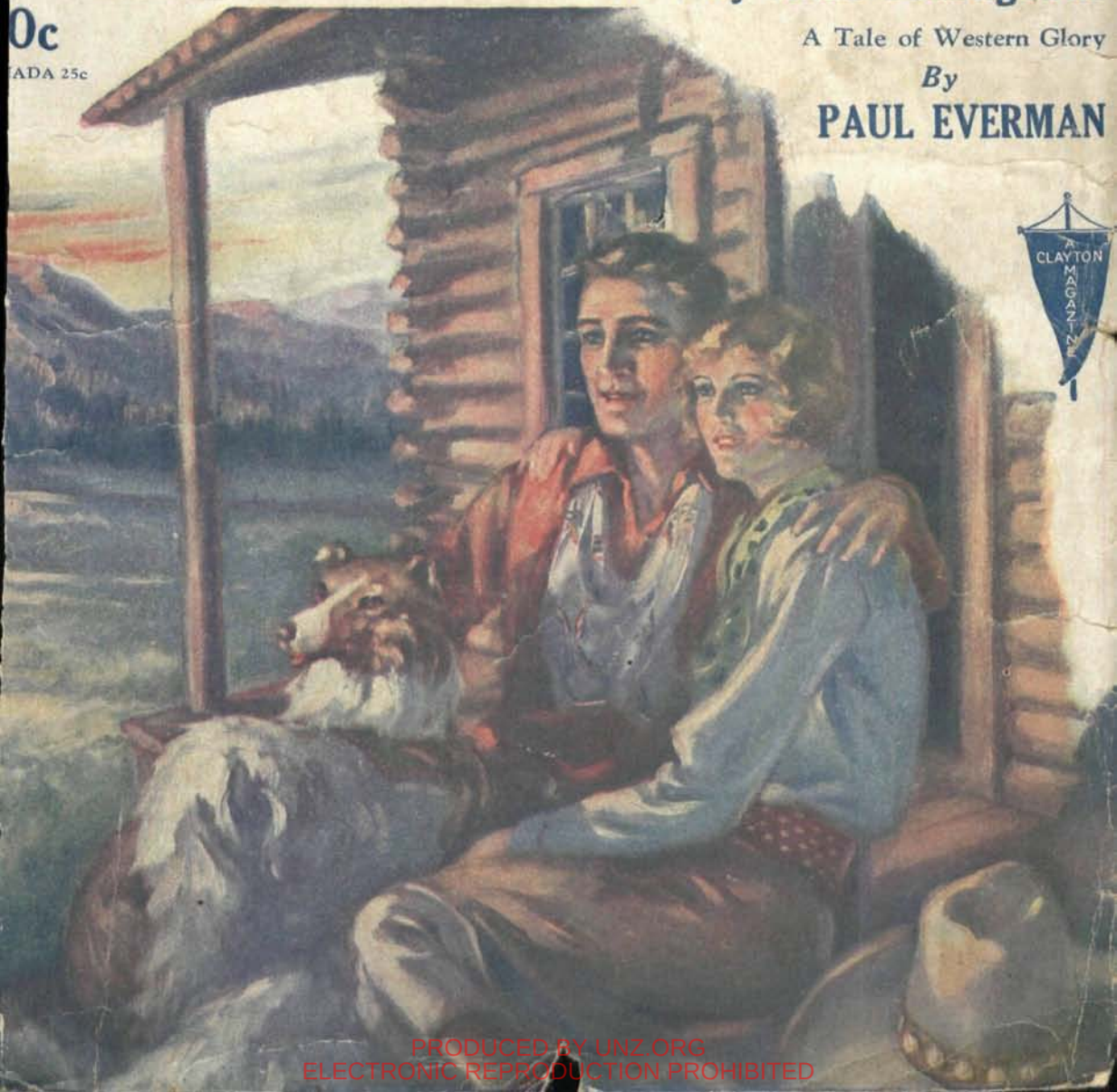
ADA 25c

Country of the Courageous

A Tale of Western Glory

By

PAUL EVERMAN



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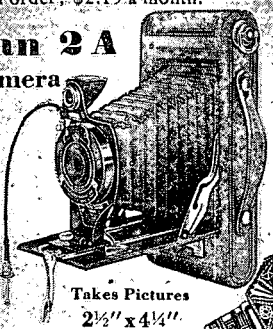

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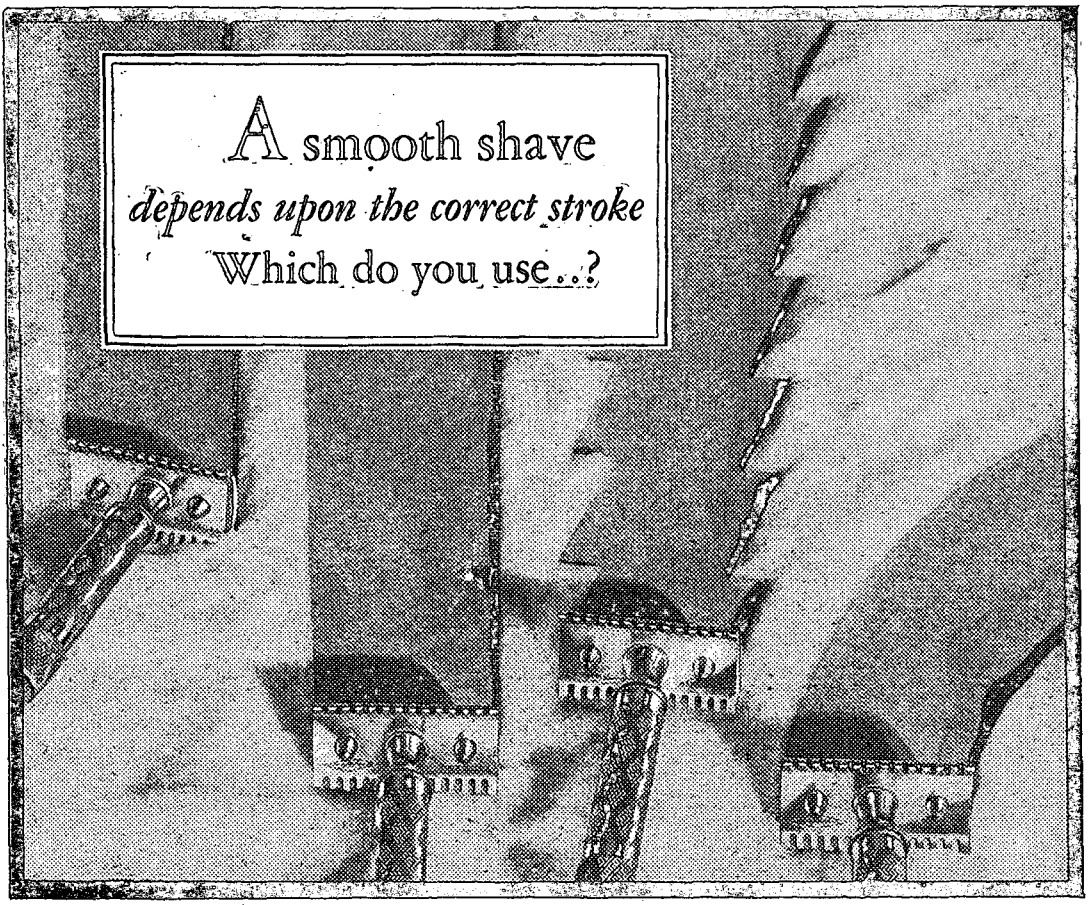

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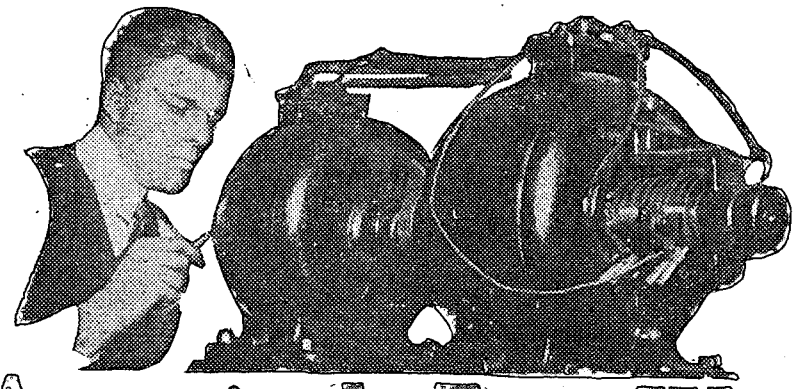

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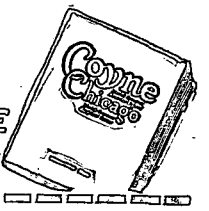

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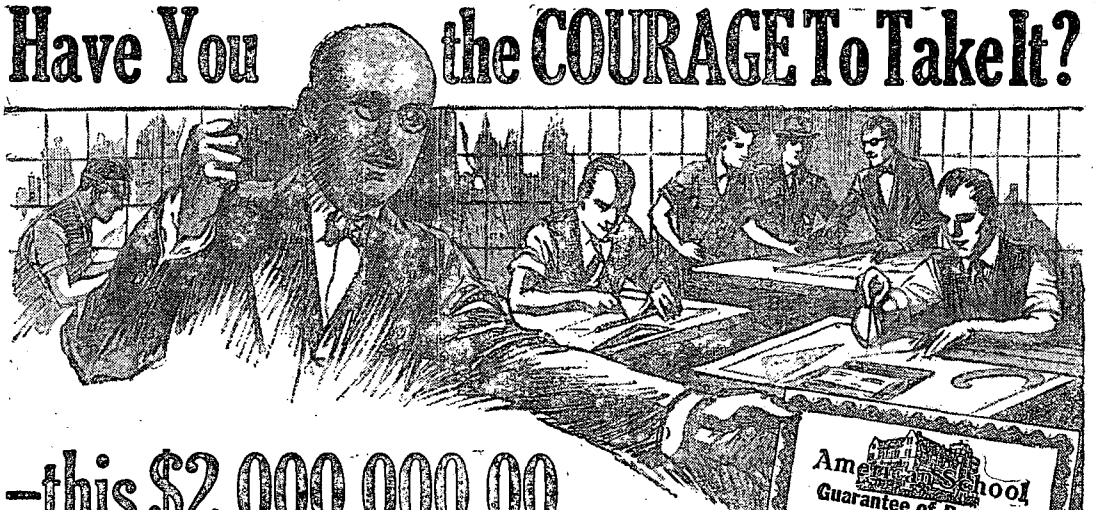

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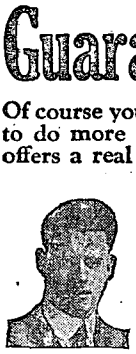

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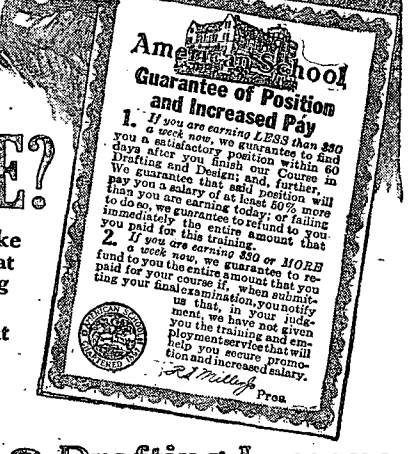
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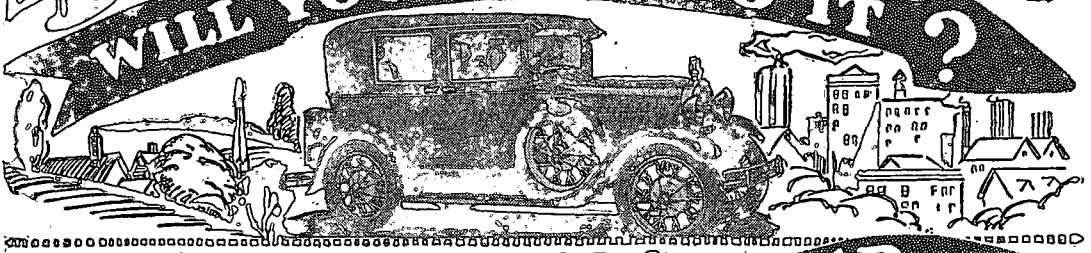

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Chevrolet	41	Hudson	23½	Overland	41	Reo	26½
Chrysler	30¾	Hupmobile	24½	Packard	21½	Star	41¾
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Another's profits as high as $100.00 a day.

VIX sells itself by 8 STARTLING demonstrations—BIG, STUNNING, ASTOUNDING, DEMONSTRATIONS. Successful VIX men make MORE MONEY than they ever made before.

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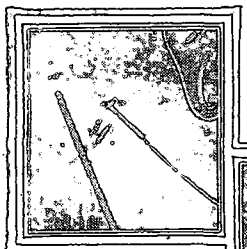

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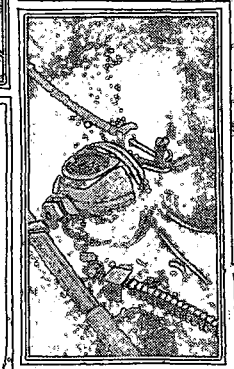

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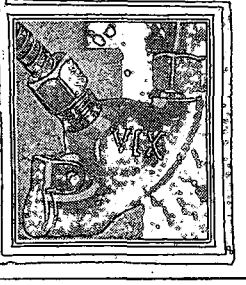

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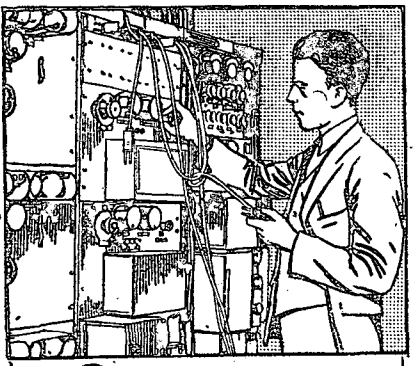

If you are earning a penny less than $50 a week, send for my book of information on the opportunities in Radio. It's FREE. Clip the coupon NOW. A flood of gold is pouring into Radio, creating hundreds of big pay jobs. Why go along at $25, $30 or $45 a week when the good jobs in Radio pay $50, $75 and up to $250 a week? "Rich Rewards in Radio" gives full information on these big jobs and explains how you can quickly learn Radio through my easy, practical home-study training.

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Your Money Back If Not Satisfied

My course fits you for all lines—manufacturing, selling, servicing sets, in business for yourself, operating on board ship or in a broadcasting station—and many others. I back up my training with a signed agreement to refund every penny of your money if, after completion, you are not satisfied with the lessons and instructions I give you.

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Washington, D. C.

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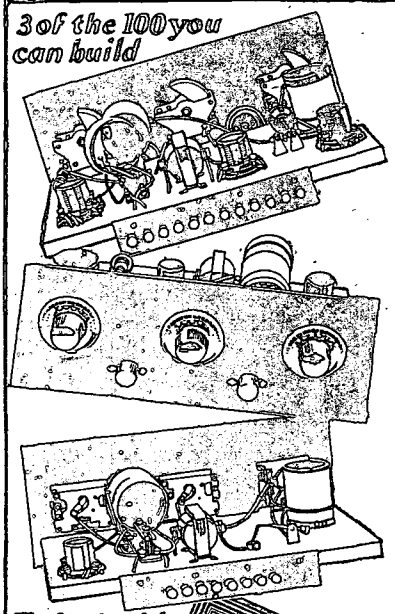
You can build 100 circuits with the six big outfits of Radio parts I give you

3 of the 100 you can build



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Dear Mr. Smith: Send me your Free book "Rich Rewards in Radio," giving information on the big-money opportunities in Radio and your practical method of teaching with six Radio Outfits. I understand this places me under no obligation.

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Ridin' After Strays

By C. Wiles Hallock

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She's th' boss's growed-up daughter;
She rides a pinto pony, name of "Blaze."
She knows how t' handle critters
(Men like her is called go-gitters)
So her an' me goes ridin' after strays.

'TAIN'T no job t' sell yer rights fer,
'Taint a chore most wranglers fights fer;
'Cause cattle sometimes wanders quite a ways.
Never used t' do it willin',
But I finds it downright thrillin'
When her an' me goes ridin' after strays!

'CAUSE fer l'arnin', she's a wonder;
An' she's purtier, by thunder,
Than gals yuh see in movin'-pitcher plays—
Calls me Bob, like I'm her fella,
An' I'm callin' *her* Luella,
Since me an' her goes ridin' after strays!

JEST last week, quite unintenshus,
I got knocked unconshe-enshus,
A buckin' hoss disabled me two days.
An' I seen her wipe a tear once,
An' she whispered "Oh, my dear," once,
While her an' me weren't ridin' after strays.

THAT there hoss—she's fearful of him;
But, Gawd bless his hide, I love him!
He jarred me up in a quite a lot o' ways!
Gosh! M' heart is jest a-jumpin',
'Cause I'm gonna find out somepin',
Next time her an' me goes ridin' after strays!

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The Call . . . . . of the West!

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Has your picture appeared in our gallery? No, not "rogues' gallery" but the portrait gallery of the Big Double R family.

If not, you had better get it in soon, because we want you there. And after your picture has been printed in the magazine we want to tack it up with the rest of the outfit—on the wall in the RANCH ROMANCES office.

Every boy and girl, man and woman, who is a member of Trail's End Club is welcome to send in their picture. We'll print it and that will hogtie you sure, as a member of the Double R family.

No matter if you're an hombre riding alone under Western stars without a job or a bunkhouse—when you get to the next town you'll surely see a Trail's End pin and that will mean a friend.

No matter if you're a lonely little ranch girl living away off at the end of a long road, where the postman scarcely ever ambles along, RANCH ROMANCES can create friends for you and fill that old wobbly mail box full to the brim.

And if you are one of those fine old-timers who, by the sweat of your brow, made the West what it is to-day—RANCH ROMANCES is a magazine that does you honor and portrays truly the life you have led and the deeds you have done.

The conquering of the great American West was one of the most colossal and romantic feats ever accomplished by mankind. RANCH ROMANCES keeps green the memory of those men and women who first faced the huge task. RANCH ROMANCES in song and story, represents that fine spirit that still dominates the West to-day.

Bing Flynn

Editor: RANCH ROMANCES.

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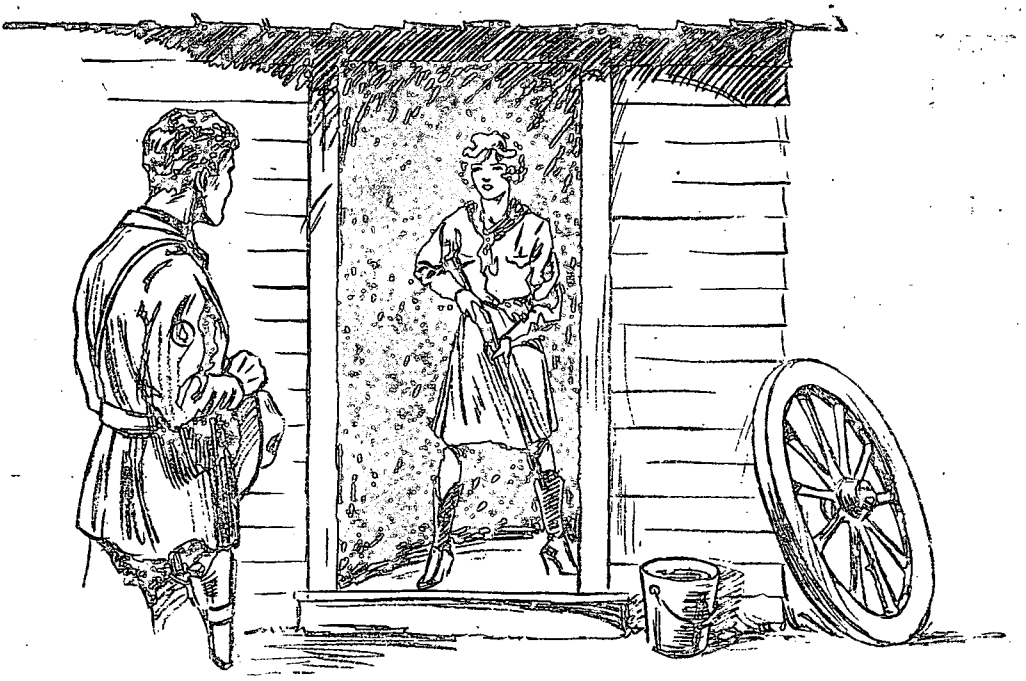

Country of the Courageous

By Paul Everman

Out on the wind-swept prairies of the cattle country life moves more swiftly—strength and courage are tried to the utmost, and love, when it comes, awakens in a blaze of glory, like the rising of the Western sun.

CHAPTER I

War Clouds

KIRK HOWIE gained his first view of Oro Grande Canyon in the moonlight. This was a matter of deliberate choice on his part. Two days ago he had left the district forester's office at San Fernandez, and had ridden across a wide expanse of piñon hills and malpais-bordered flats toward the Cuesta Mountains. The second sunset found him in a foothill canyon of the Cuestas. By pushing on steadily he might have reached his destination, the Oro Grande ranger station, by nightfall. But he had chosen to make camp in a secluded cove.

At one o'clock Kirk Howie was again in the saddle. He was a lean-hipped wiry young fellow with quiet though penetrating gray eyes. As he rode into the moonlight of Oro Grande Canyon, his silhouette showed in sharply etched lines, making him seem taller than he really was. He had timed his progress so that he would arrive at the ranger station before sunup.

The trail wound up and down along the canyon bed. On either side rose the tilting slopes of the Cuesta Mountains—the lower portions sprinkled with piñon and juniper, while blankets of pine and spruce lay in dark mystery against a skyline studded with stars.

Now there were definite reasons for the lone rider's traveling by night and his intention to call on Tom Easley, the forest ranger, at such an early hour. He was no coward; otherwise he would have demurred at undertaking the mission on which the district forester had sent him. But he was wise to the ways

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of the cow country; and now he chose to exercise caution and sound common sense—to make his entry into a strange country nocturnal and unobtrusive, and thus avoid any chance of being ambushed by a certain group of gentlemen who might have been forewarned of his coming. These men, cowpunchers, were said to be promiscuous and truculent in the handling of their six-shooters. Kirk planned to reach the ranger station without being interrupted or annoyed by a hostile reception committee. Then, fit and fresh, he would be ready to tackle the difficult job which the district forester had assigned to him.

Before starting on his trip, Kirk had studied a map of the Cuesta National Forest. He kept his eyes watchful for landmarks. After passing through a sleeping village of adobes—the town of Rancho—he turned up a small side canyon and began climbing the grade toward the south ridge. A mile up this canyon, he came to a small clearing.

Here sat a three-room log house. A picket-and-wire fence formed a square about the yard. There was a small corral and a stable. A flagpole lanced up toward the starlit heavens. Kirk knew that this must be the Oro Grande ranger station.

He dismounted. Leaving both saddler and pack horse at the gate, he approached the house.

"Easley!" he called, rapping on the door.

There was a sound of someone stirring inside the cabin. Then a voice: "Who is it?"

"It's me—Kirk Howie."

"Howie? Gosh!"

The door opened. "I'm sure glad to see you, Howie," said Ranger Tom Easley, in a pleased tone. "The district forester sent word that you were to relieve me here. But I didn't expect you this time of night. Bring your horses in."

A few minutes later, Kirk and Easley settled down in the main room of the house for a conference. Easley had lighted an oil lamp. There was a stone fireplace in one corner of the room. Stretched out on the back of a door was the hide of a bobcat. On a big pine table lay a bunch of maps and papers, dried specimens of range grasses, a couple of books, the broken brow band of a bridle.

"I sent the wife and kids on to Casa Blanca early in the week, just as soon as I got word I was to be transferred there," Tom Easley said, reddening a bit. "That's why the house looks so bare. You see, I didn't want my family here in case any more trouble with the Cross R outfit came up."

He was a sober-visaged man, not more than thirty-five, and he had a habit of running his fingers up through his thick blond hair.

"From what Burr, the district boss, says, this here Cross R outfit has sort of got you on the run, Easley," Kirk said, frankly coming to the point at once.

"You've said a mouthful," the man muttered.

"Tell me about this Cross R layout."

"The Cross R owns a lot of good range across Oro Grande Canyon," Easley explained. "Aug Mulhall, a gun-fighting bully with a couple of notches on his gun, is foreman. He's got four hard cases, tough hombres every one, riding for the ranch. The owner is George Padgett."

Kirk nodded. "I've heard of Padgett. He owns another ranch in the far eastern part of the State, doesn't he?"

"Sure. Padgett's quite a gun in business and state politics. He owns orchards and alfalfa land in Cottonwood River Valley, and has got an interest in a lumbering outfit that's cutting over in the Geronimo Forest, and keeps these two cattle outfits going besides. Dabbles in almost everything, Padgett does. He used to make the Cross R Ranch his headquarters, but during the last few years he's taken care to stay entirely away from these parts. There's an old jasper named Loco Joe Cass who lives up in the big

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timber above this station. Seems that in a cattle feud five or six years back, Padgett shot and killed Loco Joe's son. And because he knows the old man has sworn to kill him at sight, Padgett is careful to stay out of these mountains."

Kirk Howie lit a cigarette and observed, "Seems funny that a rich man like Padgett would refuse to pay his grazing fees."

"They say he's always a hard one to get money out of," Easley returned. "Anyhow, it's not easy to convince some of these rich cowmen that the Forest Service isn't playing Santa Claus to them. We've carried Padgett's fees along to the end of the grazing season each year since the slump in the livestock business, same as with the little cowmen who really needed and deserved time to make up the money. But for the last two years, the Cross R has paid no grazing fees whatever. Early this spring, Mulhall moved close to three hundred head of cattle over on the forest. I warned him that until the fees were paid, the presence of the cattle constituted an act of trespass. Things came to a showdown two weeks ago. I received orders to tell Mulhall, who acts as Padgett's agent, to remove the cattle immediately."

"And then you had your fun with Mulhall?" Kirk suggested.

Easley gulped. "I went to him and showed him the order. He tore it up and threw it in my face. Then he cussed me to everything he could think of. Dared me to pull my gun and fight him. I backed down, Howie," the ranger ended bitterly. "I didn't even talk back. I knew he'd kill me. And I thought about my wife and kids. The Cross R cattle are still on the forest range. And Mulhall swears he'll drill the first man who tries to drive them off."

"A wife and kids would sort of complicate matters in a case like that," Kirk admitted. "If you didn't want to fight Mulhall, why didn't you go to a justice of the peace and swear out a warrant against him?"

Easley shook his head. "No use appealing to the local officers. If you'll remember, this is part of a new county established by last year's legislature. The State supreme court has declared the act unconstitutional, and nobody seems to be sure whether the new county has any rights of its own or whether it's still a part of Baca County. There are no county funds to run things. The sheriff has resigned, and the county commissioners, dominated by George Padgett, have appointed a fellow named Pete Dowling in his place. Dowling will do anything Padgett tells him."

"Looks like Uncle Sam will have to do all the work himself without any help from the local officers if he expects to oust those Padgett cattle," Kirk commented cheerfully. "Are there any neighbors who might help in a pinch?"

"There are a few little cowmen who run their stock in this forest, but the Cross R outfit has got them buffaloed, and they don't want to take sides in this ruckus," Easley told him. "The Widow Logan is our nearest neighbor. She and her daughter Becky run the Four Springs Ranch, which joins up with the forest boundary on the west, this side of the Red Horse Mine. Fine folks, and not specially fond of Mulhall and his tough layout. But, of course, women folks oughtn't be mixed up in a mess of this kind. Anyhow, they couldn't help any. They only hire one cowhand, Siesta Brown, a distant relative of the Logan family. He's the laziest excuse of a cowpuncher that ever went to sleep on a horse."

"How about the assistant ranger over at the Sulphur Creek station?" Kirk inquired.

"Bud Lacey is a good kid," Easley informed him. "But he's a greenhorn, out in the woods for his first summer."

Kirk asked a few questions to acquaint himself thoroughly with the nature of the Cuesta Forest and its surroundings. Oro Grande Canyon—Easley told him—had once been a favorite

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haunt of gold miners. Hence the name, "Oro Grande." The old mine workings had all been abandoned. During recent years, however, a few prospectors had sunk shafts and bored drift tunnels at various points along the canyon. One of them, the Red Horse Mine, financed by a group of Eastern capitalists, was located northeast of the Widow Logan's ranch. Three men had been working there for some time, but had lately departed.

"I reckon their hole failed to show anything much and they probably gave it up," said Tom Easley. He eyed Kirk in wonderment, exclaiming suddenly, "Blame it, Howie, you're a cool one! Here you chat sociable-like to me about this country and mines and such, and seem to have forgotten all about the trouble with the Cross R outfit. And yet I know darned well that the district forester sent you here to take up the job where I left off and to try to get those Cross R cows out of the forest."

"That's what I came down here for, Easley," replied Kirk quietly. "And that's what I aim to do."

"You'll have to play it alone," Easley warned. "And it'll mean a fight with Mulhall and his whole tough layout. You can't bluff them by talking about governmental authority and obedience to the law."

"I don't bluff," was Kirk's forceful answer. "And I'm a tolerable good shot with a six-shooter."

Suddenly he whirled on the edge of his chair, listening. Faintly had come the sound of exploding firearms, swept eastward by the wind.

Easley flung open the door. The moon had spent its beams. A few streaks of mingling pink and lavender were stealing across the low ridges to the east. Dawn was near at hand.

"Gosh!" Easley muttered, frowning. "Wonder what that shooting means? Sounds like it's coming from the Widow Logan's ranch."

"And it sounds powerful like a gunfight to me," Kirk nodded. "Nobody'd practice shooting at a mark this time of day."

He carefully pinched off the glowing tip of his cigarette, then grabbed up saddle and bridle, and ran to the corral. The faint *pop-pop* of guns still sounded in the distance.

"Where you going, Howie?" Easley called, following him.

Kirk tightened up the cinch and sprang astride his horse.

"Just ridin'," he answered laconically. "I'm some curious to find out what all that shooting means. Leavin' this morning, aren't you, Easley? I'll be back in time to tell you good-by."

Easley stared after him, muttering, "He'll find out that it don't pay to get too curious about the things that's going on in these parts."

Kirk Howie was in an unfamiliar country, and the lingering darkness of the passing night had not entirely vanished. Consequently he had to pick his route as he rode. He urged his mount toward a saddle in the western mountain ridge, and found there a cow path which ran down the far side of the elevation. Cedars loomed up on either side, mysterious blots of shadow in the morning mists. Kirk allowed his horse more or less freedom, trusting to the animal to pick out its own way by intuition, and taking care only that they progressed in the general direction of the firing.

Meantime the shots had kept popping in intermittent flurries. Kirk could hear them more plainly now. He crossed a rocky draw, circled a ledge, and, beyond, found a fence. A few rods farther, his wise pony pulled up at a wire gate, seeming to sense that Kirk wished to pass through and continue in a westward direction.

They climbed a piñon hill. From its brow, Kirk gazed down into a small canyon. In the misty light he could see a long stone house, flat-roofed and commodious, sitting down there, with a round stockaded corral and a smaller house looming up in the background. Two trees—Kirk guessed them to be

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cottonwoods—spread their branches over the dooryard. Over near the opposite canyon slope towered a single huge pine.

"Must be the Widow Logan's ranch, the one Easley called the Four Springs outfit," thought Kirk, and his lips tightened grimly.

Shots were rolling and echoing through the little canyon. To the north, down the slope of the piñon hill, Kirk could see orange jets of flame licking out through the dimness. In an instant the meaning of these shots flashed upon him.

Shielded among the piñons of the hillsides, skulking marksmen were making an attack on the ranch house down in the canyon. Their shots rained against the stone walls.

Kirk gritted, "The low-down skunks! Making war on a couple of women—is that their game?"

CHAPTER II

"Not A-begging You"

HE worked his horse down the north slope of the hill, dismounted, and then took station behind a ledge of rock. Drawing his six-shooter, he poured shots swiftly down toward the gun flashes that still streaked through the morning mists.

Instantly the flashes ceased. A startled yell sounded. Kirk caught a glimpse of rising shapes. As he reloaded his gun, he counted four men who ran back among the trees and hastily mounted horses. Again his six-shooter streaked flame. He pumped shots toward the men as fast as his finger could pull the trigger.

His attack had been a distinct surprise to the four. Evidently they had no desire to remain here and investigate. They seemed to think an army had descended upon them. And Kirk Howie, who was in a mood for battle, shrugged contemptuously as they thundered down the slope and struck down-canyon.

By now the skies were brightening. Kirk could see that the four men were wearing handkerchief masks across their faces.

"I'd like to see just what those hombres look like," he decided.

Springing into his saddle, he galloped after the retreating men. They turned out the canyon, crossed a draw to the left, and spurred on across a brushy flat. Kirk followed them to the edge of the flat, and then paused.

On the precipitous slope below rose up an immense pile of broken rock. A small cabin was perched precariously nearby. Kirk watched the riders sail down past this cabin and disappear amid the thick evergreens below. They were bent low in their saddles. Kirk had failed to get a close look at them. But the markings of the horse ridden by the man in the lead had showed up distinctly in the faint light. The horse was a spotted animal, a pinto.

"I reckon I'll remember that pony if I see him again," said Kirk to himself.

He sent a curious glance at the cabin below. A mining camp, evidently, and it seemed to be deserted. Easley had told him about such a mine as this, located northwest of the Logan ranch. The Red Horse Mine, Easley had called it.

Kirk rode back to the ranch house. The skies were bright and glowing now, and the ranch headquarters showed singularly homelike and attractive. To the south the timbered crest of Cuesta Peak formed a background mysterious and beautiful. The slopes of the little canyon were green with cedar and piñon. Along the level bed ran a silvery stream of water fed by the four springs which had given the ranch its name.

Kirk stepped down from his horse and approached the house. A shattered window, a splintered door, a tall galvanized-iron chimney which leaned at a grotesque angle on the roof—these gave evidence of the withering gunfire that had been directed by the skulkers on the hillside.

The door opened. A woman ap-

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peared on the threshold. She was buxom, middle-aged. She gazed at Kirk a bit doubtfully.

He bowed. "Howdy, ma'am. Seems that you've had a little trouble—" And then he broke off, his attention drawn to a girl who had appeared in the doorway.

Now Kirk Howie had not made much of a study of girls. In fact, he had never given them a great deal of thought. But now he found himself marveling over the discovery that here was a girl who, in his opinion, happily combined the ultimate in attractiveness and desirability.

Kirk couldn't have explained his feelings had he tried. This wasn't the prettiest girl he had ever seen. She had freckles—not big, bold freckles, but small, unobtrusive freckles that were like flecks of sunshine. Her eyes were clear and brown and honest and unafraid. Her lips were a ripe red. A thick braid of brown hair hung down her back. She wasn't very big, this young lady wasn't, and she wore riding breeches and high-heeled boots and a blue woollen shirt. Altogether, she presented a picture which to Kirk Howie was plumb fetching.

Meanwhile the girl had been looking at Kirk. She saw a square-shouldered, wiry young fellow with cool, gray eyes, garbed in whipcord breeches, high-topped laced boots, O. D. shirt, and wearing a hat which, while somewhat broad of brim, was hardly the regulation cowboy type.

She spoke impulsively. "I'll bet you're the new man over at the Oro Grande ranger station—" She paused, and wrinkled her nose a bit scornfully as she added: "Another ranger!"

Kirk sensed that forest rangers didn't stand exactly ace-high in the young woman's estimation.

"You're right, miss," he said. "I'm the new ranger. My name's Kirk Howie."

The older woman extended her hand cordially. "I'm sure glad to meet you, Mr. Howie. I hope you'll find us good neighbors. I'm Mrs. Logan, and this is my daughter, Becky. Excuse me if I didn't seem over-friendly when you first rode up. You see, Becky and me have been treed in the house for the past two hours, and when I first saw you I didn't know but what you might be one of the gang that's been shoveling hot lead in our direction."

Kirk laughed good-naturedly. "No. But I happened to see the gang you mention. They rode northwest, toward Oro Grande Canyon. There were four in the bunch." He modestly refrained from telling that it was he who had routed the attackers, and that he had followed their retreat for half a mile.

"I reckon they got tired of shooting, or ran out of ammunition—that's why they rode away," said the Widow Logan. "Becky and I couldn't see them, but could tell from the flashes of their guns that they were lying up on the slope of that east hill yonder."

"You don't have any idea who they were?"

"None at all," she admitted. "And I don't know what their object was. Becky and I were in bed, sound asleep, when they started shooting at the house. I'm not a complaining woman, Mr. Howie, and I'm accustomed to living on the frontier. But if this sort of thing keeps us, and if those varmints, whoever they are, make another attack like this one, I'll be ready to move out of this country for keeps."

"Shucks, Mom," remonstrated Becky Logan decidedly. "We're not going to be bluffed out that easy. It strikes me that this night riding outfit was only trying to scare us. Most of their shots went against the stone walls and the roof. I don't believe they meant to kill us. This is too early in the game to talk about running out of the country."

"But all these other troubles we've had makes it look like somebody's got a spite at us, and is determined to clean us out," said her mother in a worried tone.

"Well, we're not running yet," Becky announced spiritedly.

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The Widow Logan turned to Kirk. "You see, up until a week ago the Four Springs Ranch was the most peaceful spot on earth. And then, all a-sudden, things began to happen. First Becky found that half a mile of our fence had been cut. Not just in a few places, but between every two posts. Then two nights ago, somebody sneaked up and smashed the pipe line that brings water from the springs, and filled in two of the springs besides. I reckon the varmints will be stealing our cattle next."

At this juncture, the door of the small house standing behind the main dwelling came open, and a man ambled outside.

"Oh, yes," Mrs. Logan sighed to Kirk, sighting the man as he shuffled around the corner. "Here comes another trouble we've got here at the ranch. We've had him for some time. He's a fourth cousin of mine, though I don't dwell on the subject much, not being much of a hand to complain. His name's Brown, and we call him 'Siesta' because he's always asleep."

Siesta Brown was a big, lumbering man. He shuffled forward on his run-over boots, thumbing a strap of his overalls with one hand, while he rumpled his thick hair with the other.

"Don't it beat all!" he yawned. "Who was them fellers that tried to shoot up this ranch?"

"I suppose you crawled under your bed and hid as soon as you heard the shooting," Becky accused sharply.

"Naw, sir, Becky," Siesta declared. "That shootin' woke me up. I rolled over, an' tried to go back to sleep, but to save myself I couldn't make the grade. Dang them fellers," he said indignantly, "if I ever ketch 'em, I'll teach 'em never to interrupt no sleep of mine ag'in."

"You'll never catch any of 'em unless they happen to stumble over you somewhere and wake you up," Becky sniffed.

Siesta took no offense at this. He was used to uncomplimentary remarks. In fact, Siesta Brown was a marvel to all who knew him. He had even been known to go to sleep while riding a horse. It was Mrs. Logan's opinion that he suffered from some unknown affliction which was responsible for this peculiar tendency. But Becky declared that Siesta's only ailment was laziness. And she bossed him around and saw to it that he earned his wages as a cowhand.

"Siesta, shake hands with Mr. Howie, the new ranger," Mrs. Logan said.

Siesta blinked his eyes and became almost wide awake.

"New ranger, huh?" he said. "Gosh, mister, you've shore bit off more'n you can chaw, if you've took Ranger Easley's job. I don't want to skeer you none. But I reckon you ort to be warned that if you try to fight Aug Mulhall an' the Cross R outfit, you won't stay in this country long above ground."

"No," Kirk returned quietly, "you don't scare me none. And I aim to stay here—above ground."

Becky Logan struck in, "Are you really going to try to chase the Cross R cattle off the reserve?"

"That seems to be my main job at present," Kirk nodded.

The girl's brown eyes showed approval.

"It's about time the Government sent a man who can handle the Cross R outfit," she declared. "Tom Easley's too timid for the job. And George Padgett and Aug Mulhall need to be shown that they're not bigger than the Government."

"You're too set in your opinions, Becky," rebuked her mother. "I don't think we ought to criticize Tom Easley for backing down before Mulhall. He's got a family to consider."

"And if I'd been his wife, I'd have begged him not to take all he took from Mulhall," Becky asserted aggressively. "I'd have told him to go ahead and fight. I like to see a man show some sand."

Siesta Brown had sunk down comfortably against the sun-warmed wall

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of the ranch house. His head dropped against his chest. He was half asleep when the clatter of approaching hoofs startled him. The others turned their eyes down the canyon. A rider had appeared around the bend.

"Now don't that beat all!" the Widow Logan exclaimed. "There comes Aug Mulhall now."

Mulhall was a short, powerful man with a thick, hairy neck and a pair of cold, sunken eyes. He wore a pair of torn chaps, and carried no gun that could be seen. He reined over to the ranch house, and stepped to the ground.

"Howdy, Miz Logan," he said in a rasping voice which strove to be cordial. "Whut's been goin' on here? I was ridin' the Oro Grande road towards Rancho an' heerd some shootin' over this way. Thought I'd stop an' see whut the trouble was."

Mrs. Logan explained the attack on the ranch house.

"Yuh say somebody tried to shoot up the place?" Mulhall said in a surprised tone. "That was a low-down, ornery trick. Ef I was yuh, I'd report it to Sher'ff Dowling."

"Pete Dowling is nothing but a tinhorn sheriff," the Widow replied contemptuously. "I won't waste my breath carrying my troubles to him."

"Aw, Pete's all right," Mulhall declared. "He's a friend o' mine. I'll bet these here fellers yuh mention is Mexicans from Oro Grande Canyon. Did yuh git a look at 'em?"

"It wasn't light yet—" Mrs. Logan began.

Kirk Howie took a step forward. His cool gray eyes met Mulhall's gaze, roved toward the latter's horse, a big pinto, and then whipped back upon the man.

"I got a pretty good look at the coyotes who tried to shoot up the house," he stated coolly. "They wore handkerchief masks. And one of them rode a horse that I'd recognize anywhere. It's a big pinto."

Aug Mulhall's heavy shoulders jerked back.

"A big pinto, huh?" he rasped. "Yuh mean to insinuate that it was *my* hoss yuh saw—that *I* was one o' the gents that was shootin' at this house?"

"That pinto horse sure fits the picture," was Kirk's cool answer. "I see you're wearing your bandanna around your neck now, Mulhall. And you left your gun behind when you made this call. I reckon you figured that'd convince these women folks of your friendliness."

Mulhall's face purpled. "He's a-lyin', Miz Logan," he grated. "I never had no hand a-tall in that shootin'."

"I ain't so sure about that," Mrs. Logan returned sharply. "I never did place a heap o' trust in you, Aug Mulhall, though why you and your outfit should try to cause me trouble is a thing I can't understand."

Mulhall saw that Kirk Howie's damaging statements had aroused the ranch woman's suspicions. He whirled on Kirk.

"Who in hell are yuh, anyhow, to come hornin' in thisaway?"

"Name's Howie," Kirk informed him tersely. "New forest ranger at the Oro Grande station."

"Forest ranger, huh?" Mulhall threw back his shaggy head and laughed derisively. "Come to take Easley's place, I reckon. Know who I am? I'm Aug Mulhall, foreman o' the Cross R spread."

He stepped forward, his jaw set pugnaciously. "I'm foreman o' the Cross R spread," he repeated meaningly. "If yuh've got anything to say to me, spit it out. We'll have a showdown, *pronto!*"

Kirk saw that Mulhall was desirous of baiting him into a quarrel. Likely the man figured that by playing a strong bluff now, he could cow him as he had done Easley, and cause him to desist from any attempt to drive the Cross R cattle from the forest lands. Yet Kirk sensed, too, that Mulhall would go farther than a bluff. He had met Mulhall's type before. To such men, governmental authority was a far

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removed thing having its seat in Washington. Their attitude toward local representatives like Tom Easley, who had backed down in the face of threats and superior numbers, was one of derision and contempt. Mulhall was plainly a man who was ready to back his employer's game to the limit. And the fact that he was said to carry two notches on his gun and still roamed abroad as a free man, was a pretty good sign that he did not fear the consequences of undertaking the activity requisite to put still another notch in his gun.

Kirk turned to the women. "If you ladies won't mind stepping inside the house a minute—" he suggested quietly.

"We'll stay here," Becky told him. "Go ahead. Don't mind us."

Kirk caught sight of Siesta Brown, who stood to one side, signaling toward him frantically. Unobserved by the women or Mulhall, Siesta pointed toward the eastern slope of the piñon hill. Kirk glimpsed a man dodging along the slope. This man took shelter behind one of the bushy evergreens. Poking out between the branches came a dark-gleaming rifle barrel.

Kirk's eyes narrowed. One of Mulhall's men, likely. And he was lying there in ambush, his rifle trained on the group below.

Suddenly, Aug Mulhall removed his torn black hat, flung it to the ground, picked it up and replaced it on his head. He accomplished this maneuver in such a clumsy manner that Kirk was convinced it was a signal to the hidden rifleman. So this was Mulhall's game! he thought. Mulhall himself wore no gun. But should a fight occur, his *compadre* on the hillside would be ready to aid him.

The thing looked like a trap, especially so when Mulhall continued his attempts to bait Kirk into a quarrel.

"Let's have a showdown!" he bellowed, shoving up against the new ranger. "Tell me, jest whut do yuh allow to do about them Cross R critters that's on forest range?"

"I aim to move 'em off," Kirk answered coolly.

"Jest listen!" Mulhall jeered. "Uncle Sam's sent another one o' his Campfire girls out to run this forest!" He laughed coarsely at his joke. "When yuh havin' the next tea party at yore station, sister?"

"Tea parties have sorta gone out o' style at the Oro Grande station," Kirk said grimly.

Mulhall reached out and wiggled a thick finger insultingly under his nose.

"Yuh rangers ort to be in petticoats," he sneered. "Yuh make me sick. Yuh're a white-livered, yeller-backed bunch o' sissified houn'-dawgs."

Kirk's gray eyes gleamed dangerously. He measured the distance toward Mulhall's protruding chin. Oh, what a joy to smash home a good sound wallop on that chin! But he subdued the impulse. He realized that Mulhall was still deliberately baiting him into an attack. Likely the hidden rifleman had his sights trained on him this very moment. If Kirk made a move toward Mulhall, the result would probably be suicide to himself and danger to the women in the line of fire.

Mulhall stepped back a pace. He dangled his hands at his sides, and again thrust out his chin.

"Hit me!" he begged. "I ain't even wearin' a gun. C'mon, sister. Let's see if they's any fight a-tall in yuh. Pull yore shootin'-iron. Take a shot at me. I'll fight yuh bare-handed."

Kirk's mouth was white-ringed. "No, Mulhall," he said evenly. "I'm no fool. We'll meet again, when the cards are dealt in a different way."

With a shrug, Mulhall climbed on his horse. He rode away down the canyon, shouting taunts.

"Well, it all ended up without any shootin'," said Siesta Brown in a relieved tone, again sinking down against the ranch house wall. "Mebbe I'll have a chanct to ketch up in my sleep now."

Becky Logan had walked away. She paused under the big pine tree, and did not even glance at Kirk Howie.

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"Don't mind Becky," Mrs. Logan said to Kirk, trying to be kind. "Myself, I'm kinda glad you didn't try to fight Mulhall. He's a regular killer, they say. Course, you had a gun, and he didn't, but—well, anyhow I'm glad Mulhall has gone."

It was obvious that the women knew nothing of the marksman who had been hidden on the hillside. The dark-gleaming rifle barrel no longer showed between the piñon branches.

"That hombre's slipped away, and will join Mulhall farther down the canyon," was Kirk's thought.

"I ain't a complaining woman," Mrs. Logan went on, "but it gives me the shivers to think maybe the Cross R outfit is behind all the troubles we've been havin' at this ranch. And it sure looks like that's the case."

"You don't know of any reason why Mulhall should be trying to cause you trouble here?" Kirk inquired quietly. She shook her head. And Kirk went on, "You have a telephone, haven't you? In case Mulhall tries any more tricks on your range, give me a ring at the ranger station. Maybe I'll be able to help you some."

"That's right good of you, Mr. Howie," said the widow gratefully. "But I just wonder if any of us will have a chance, fighting that big powerful ranch outfit of George Padgett's."

Kirk mounted his horse and rode over to the big pine.

"Miss Becky," he said.

The girl raised her head and looked at him coldly.

"I take it that you've decided I'm like Tom Easley," he said. "You think I'm afraid of Mulhall."

"No," she answered sharply. "Not exactly like Tom Easley. He has a wife and family. That gave him some excuse for backing down before Mulhall."

Kirk's lean jaws became set. "You think I'm a coward, then?"

"I'm disappointed in you," she said impatiently. "I had thought that maybe you would be different from Easley. But you let Mulhall call you all those names, and you practically refused to fight him—even though you had a gun, and he didn't."

Kirk gazed down at her. Her brown hair gleamed richly in the morning sunlight. Her red lips were compressed. What a little fire-eater she was! he thought, almost angrily. Yet stronger than the thought was a desire to take her in his arms, to kiss those red lips and make them smile for him, to bring to those brown eyes a light less stormy and unyielding.

"Miss Becky," he said at last, "you don't understand. And I'm not a-begging you to believe the best of me. I reckon there will be other ways of convincing you."

He rode away toward the ranger station. He had not explained his seeming lack of courage. And Siesta Brown, who had seen the hidden rifleman on the hillside, and might have explained, now sat against the ranch house wall, head sunken on chest, sound asleep.

CHAPTER III

Becky Sends a Warning

BACK at the ranger station, Kirk Howie gave Tom Easley a brief account of his morning adventures. Easley could throw no light on the reason behind the Cross R outfit's attack on the Logan ranch.

The two spent the remainder of the morning going over the list of grazing permits. On a map of the Cuesta Forest Easley pointed out the principal watering places, and explained various other topographical features of the territory over which Kirk was to be in charge.

"Easley," Kirk said abruptly, "will it be much of a job to round up those Cross R cattle?"

"No," returned the other. "The big job will come in driving them out of the forest—for that will mean a fight with Mulhall. I reckon Burr, the district forester, has been determined all

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this time to remove the cattle. At any rate, he sent me orders early in the spring to keep them from scattering over the forest range. As soon as Mulhall brought the critters over here, at snow-melting, I maneuvered to keep them in one locality. There's good feeding grounds up southeast of this station." He pointed out the place on the map. "Right here. It's called Bobcat Meadow, but it's really a small basin hemmed in by ridges. There's good water, and I've done a little salting to help keep the Cross R cows on that range and to prevent the other range stuff from mixing with them. You'll find the whole Cross R herd in that basin, and it won't take much work to make a round-up."

"That will make my job a lot easier," Kirk nodded.

"Then you're determined to go through with it, huh?" said Easley dubiously, but with a whole lot of respect. "I reckon Mulhall hasn't bluffed *you* out—yet."

Kirk smiled queerly. "Becky Logan thinks he has."

Easley had gathered up his personal belongings. A moment later he rode away, bidding farewell to the job which had been too big for him to handle.

Kirk Howie watched him go. As he stepped back inside the cabin, his glance fell on a large American flag lying on the pine table. It was a tradition in the Forest Service that as a part of the celebration of all national holidays, the flag should be raised at every ranger station.

And Kirk said vigorously, aloud, "By gosh! I reckon it's up to me to convince the Cross R outfit that that flag is something more than a decoration to run up on holidays. Uncle Sam owns this forest. And, like Becky Logan says, Mulhall and his gang ought to be showed that they're not bigger than the Government."

That afternoon, he rode into Rancho and purchased a supply of foodstuffs, mostly canned goods. Rancho was a town of adobe houses strung along the bed of Oro Grande Canyon. Its population was preponderantly Mexican. There were a schoolhouse, a post office, and a few stores.

The trip proved uneventful for Kirk. Loading the supplies on his pack horse, he rode back to the ranger station.

At daylight next day, he was ready to ride over to the Sulphur Creek station. He wished to talk to Bud Lacey, the assistant ranger. As he was saddling up his horse, a jingling of the telephone drew him from the corral.

"Mr. Howie?" came a breathless voice over the wire. He recognized it as Becky Logan's.

"Yes," he answered swiftly. "What is it? Has Mulhall and his gang been back at your ranch, trying to cause trouble?"

"No—not that." There was a pause. Then Becky resumed, "But Mulhall rode past the house only a short time ago. I saw him cut across onto the forest—"

"Yes?" Kirk prompted.

"Well, I thought you ought to know! I was afraid—I thought maybe he had some trick up his sleeve; that he might circle back toward the station and take you unawares and cause you more trouble."

"Why—thanks," said Kirk.

He was a bit chagrined. He had asked the Widow Logan to call on him in case they needed help against Mulhall's gang at the ranch. But now the situation was reversed. Evidently Becky, feeling that he was a timorous sort of hombre and entirely incapable of coping with men of Mulhall's type, had taken pity on him.

"What would you advise?" he inquired, unable to restrain a bit of sarcasm.

It seemed that Becky Logan misinterpreted his question as evidence of further helplessness on his part.

"What would I advise?" she snapped over the wire. "Why, I think you'd better lie low and not even stick your head outside the station. You'll be plumb safe thataway."

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The telephone receiver slammed up.

"Becky Logan," said Kirk, entirely to himself. "I reckon you've taken pity on me. And it's not pity I want—none a-tall!"

So Aug Mulhall was snooping around somewhere in the forest! Kirk was in exactly the proper mood to relish meeting Mulhall. But at present he meant to carry out his plans of visiting Assistant Ranger Lacey.

He struck out from the station, progressing in a general southerly direction. Half a mile on his way, he passed a group of cabins sitting in the shade of slender pines. The cabins, now unoccupied, were evidently summer homes of townspeople who came to the mountains to fish and rest.

A narrow trail, called the Ranger Trail, wound up along the slopes of Cuesta Peak and, passing near the crest, dropped down into the canyon on the other side. Kirk rode this trail. The forest was cool and refreshingly beautiful. Clean little alpine parks lay among the yellow-trunked trees, some of which had attained great stature. The ranger crossed a swift trout stream bordered by aspens whose quivering round leaves and straight whitish boles made them seem as fresh and succulent as some garden plant.

The crest of Cuesta Peak was thick with Douglas fir and blue-needled Englemann spruce. As Kirk passed down into the opposite canyon, he caught a glimpse of a black, wild region to the east, so overgrown with tangles of brush that a mounted man would have encountered difficulty penetrating it.

Kirk was gaining his first visual impressions of the lands over which he was to be in control, and at Sulphur Creek, a turbulent little stream in the canyon beyond Cuesta Peak, he met Bud Lacey, his assistant, for the first time.

Lacey was a freckled, impulsive young fellow, a new man in the Forest Service, plainly a greenhorn so far as actual experience was concerned. But he was anxious to learn.

"By golly, that's the talk, Howie!" he exclaimed approvingly, after he and Kirk had talked awhile at the Sulphur Creek station. "I'll help you drive those Cross R cows off the forest range. I kept urging Easley not to let Mulhall bluff him out; but Tom got cold feet. Heck," the young fellow scoffed, "all we need to do is show Mulhall we mean business. He's just bluffing. He don't dare try any gunplay against a forest ranger. We've got Uncle Sam backing us up."

Kirk smiled gently. "Bud, you're wrong. Mulhall and his men will dare anything. The chances are we'll have a fight on our hands, with guns. Can you shoot?"

"Not a whole lot," Bud admitted.

Kirk pointed to a cottonwood sapling some thirty paces away. "See if you can hit that sapling, Bud."

Bud tried. Out of six shots with his Colt's .38 Special, he managed to hit the sapling once. Kirk pulled his own six-shooter. His first shot struck the center of the slender target.

"Now, Bud, I'll see if I can peel the bark on either side."

His gun boomed twice. Bud ran to examine the sapling. He came back, goggling in admiration.

"By gosh," he panted. "You done it! You peeled the bark off first one side and then the other. That's what I call shooting! Where did you learn to handle a gun in that fashion, Howie?"

"I was born on the range, and worked for cow outfits up until the time I went into the Forest Service," was Kirk's reply. "It's a pretty good idea for a cowpuncher to know how to shoot; and the same goes for a forest ranger. There may be gunplay when we try to move the Cross R cows off the forest range. Are you ready and game for the play, Bud? I could use your help in rounding up the cattle. I figure to start tomorrow morning."

"I'll be over at sunup," said Bud Lacey explosively. "When I went into the Forest Service, I didn't figure I

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was joining the United States Army. But I'm ready to back you to the finish, Howie."

Kirk rode back across the ranger trail. Reaching the highest point of the trail he paused and loosened his mount's cinch, giving the animal a chance to blow. Again his eyes wandered over toward that wild, brush-grown region that had drawn his attention before. Suddenly, jerking the cinch tight, he led his horse behind a shelf of rock at the trailside.

Out of the dense brush to the east had come a rider. It was Aug Mulhall. He rode with his heavy shoulders slightly bent, and carried a Winchester carbine across the pommel of his saddle.

"Hands up, Mulhall! Drop that rifle!" The sharp command rang out as Mulhall turned into the ranger trail and reached a point only a few feet from the shelf of rock.

Aug Mulhall was no fool. Behind the rock itself, he saw the black muzzle of a six-shooter covering him, backed up by two cool gray eyes that warned against delay or trifling. The foreman allowed his rifle to fall to the ground. His hairy hands went into the air.

Kirk stepped forward. Still keeping Mulhall covered, he walked in behind and snatched the other's six-shooter from its holster.

"Now, Mulhall," he commanded in steely tones, "get down off that horse and take a licking."

Mulhall's sunken eyes, venomous in their glitter, menaced him.

"Our little Campfire girl is shore gittin' brave all a-sudden," he sneered. "I cain't believe it—yuh havin' nerve enough to git the drop on me thisaway."

"I want your chin, Mulhall," Kirk told him calmly. "Stick it out, like you did yesterday morning. I aim to hit it."

"Wha-a-at?" the foreman gasped, incredulously. "Yuh mean yuh aim to fight *me?* I give yuh the chanct yestiddy—"

"The odds are even now," interrupted Kirk. "You haven't got one of your punchers hidden behind a piñon tree, ready to crack down on me."

The other man scowled blackly.

"Mebbe yuh think I'm afeard to tackle a effeminate critter like a forest ranger, huh?" he jeered suddenly. "Is that it? Take that gun off'n yore hip, an' we'll settle our little affair right now an' complete."

Kirk unstrapped his gunbelt and tossed it, with the six-shooter, aside.

"The odds are even now, you skunk," he said deliberately. "It's man to man, bare-handed. Come a-fightin'!"

Mulhall laughed savagely. Plainly he figured that the wiry forest ranger was no match for him. Lowering his head, he lunged forward, his fists flailing in wide arcs. Kirk dodged aside. A sharp left hook caught Mulhall off balance, and sent him staggering. He whirled about, and made another mad rush. Kirk's fist smashed out, landed on Mulhall's chin and sent the latter back on his heels.

"One o' these fancy-steppin' scrappers, air yuh?" Mulhall raged.

Again he came rushing in. This time he made no attempt to strike. His powerful arms grappled outward. Kirk had already sized Mulhall up as a rough-and-tumble type of fighter. He realized the danger of allowing the fight to develop into a rough-and-tumble affair, in which Mulhall's tremendous strength would show to advantage. He knew too that Mulhall was the sort of fighter who would take any advantage possible; would kick, bite, gouge, maim, all with bestial disregard for fair play.

Kirk barely evaded the other's lunge. His fist cracked against Mulhall's right eye. Again a rush! This time Mulhall's hand caught Kirk's shoulder, but the lighter man wrenched himself free.

"Yuh dassen't stand up an' fight me!" Mulhall bellowed furiously.

"Come on!" Kirk clicked out the invitation.

Mulhall rushed again. This time

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Kirk made no effort to dodge. But he summoned all his strength in a terrific uppercut which passed under Mulhall's guard, crashed upon his chin and knocked him prostrate in a grotesque heap, unconscious.

When the battered gunman awakened, Kirk stood over him.

"Here's your horse," the ranger said quietly. "You've been whipped in a fair, stand-up fight. I'll keep your guns. And now, Mulhall—there's the trail."

Mulhall swayed into the saddle.

"Another thing," Kirk Howie said grimly. "If you and your sorry outfit try to cause any more trouble at the Logan ranch, I'll try to arrange to be on hand with my shootin' clothes on. Get that, hombre?"

"I'll git yuh fer this, feller!" the battered foreman mumbled between swollen lips. As he rode out of sight down the trail, he fairly shrieked, "Next time we meet, I'll be heeled ag'in an' ready fer yuh. I'm warnin' yuh to come a-shootin'!"

Kirk gathered up the guns and swung into his saddle, preparatory to riding to the Oro Grande ranger station.

Suddenly, a shape rose into view from behind a clump of brush, not more than fifty yards away. Kirk found himself looking at a man who wore thorn-snagged chaps, a patched blue shirt and Indian moccasins. The man was beyond six feet in height, and thin as a ghost. He was bare-headed; his thick stubble of gray hair grew low on his forehead. He leaned on a long, antiquated squirrel rifle while his eyes, bright, cunning and feral, gazed fixedly at the ranger.

"H'lo," he said vaguely. "H'lo. I seen it all. Know who I am? I'm Joe Cass. Mebbe you've heerd o' me. Folks says I'm crazy. That's a lie." He repeated the words monotonously over and over: "That's a lie."

Kirk saw that the man was deranged. Tom Easley had told him about "Loco" Joe Cass.

"You a ranger?" Loco Joe asked.

Kirk nodded.

"Come to take Tom Easley's place, I reckon," said the other. "Tom, he was afeard to tackle Mulhall. But you ain't. You whupped Mulhall with yore bare hands. I was hid over in the bresh, an' I seen you." He laughed gleefully.

"Let's see," Kirk said. "You live somewhere on this peak, don't you, Cass?"

"Shore." Loco Joe waved toward the dense growths of brush. "I got a shack back in there. Aug Mulhall come snoopin' round this mornin', spyin' on me. I knowed he was lookin' fer me. But I fooled him. He didn't even ketch sight o' me. I was hid in the bresh. I had a hundred chances to kill Mulhall—but I held my fire."

"Easley told me you've had some trouble with the Cross R outfit," Kirk Howie said.

"With George Padgett, it was," Loco Joe raved suddenly. "Padgett killed my son. It was cold-blooded murder. Padgett bought hisself free an' wasn't prosecuted. I sent him word I'd kill him. He quit the country. He ain't been back sence. He's afeard o' me. He'd 'a' tried to hunt me down an' git rid o' me, but he knows I can stand off a army up in that bresh where I live. He's afeard to live at the Cross R Ranch any more. He savvies I'll slip down some night an' kill him if he tries that. I hope he does try it. Mebbe he will. I'm a-waitin' fer him." Kirk looked at him pityingly.

"I like you, feller," said Loco Joe. "I'll come down to the ranger station an' visit with you some time. I drop down that way occasional-like when I'm keepin' my lookout fer Padgett." With a jerky nod he glided away into the brush, calling over his shoulder, "Folks says I'm crazy, but I ain't."

Kirk rode on down the trail to the ranger station. It was his opinion that George Padgett would be wise to stay out of the Oro Grande Canyon country so long as Loco Joe Cass was alive.

Consequently Kirk was surprised at

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the appearance of the stranger who galloped up to the station that afternoon.

"I'm George Padgett," announced the rider bruskly, reining up to the door of the house. "I've come to tell you that no half-baked forest ranger can run my cow outfit off the map. Lay down your cards, feller. This game's come to a showdown!"

CHAPTER IV

Padgett Exposes His Hand

GEORGE PADGETT was a florid, stocky man. He was garbed in a belted suit of brown corduroy, wore a six-shooter on his hip, and rode a pedigreed sorrel horse that kept tossing its head desperately, seeking to escape the torture of the cruel Spanish bit between its jaws.

Kirk Howie was an admirer of good horse flesh. The sorrel was no outlaw brute, he could see; and he was filled with contempt for the owner, who intensified the splendid and naturally docile animal's torment by jerking roughly on the reins. But Padgett's features suggested that this trait of dominance and cruelty was characteristic. His face was hard and square, and fixed in its expression. His nose, hooked and sharp like a scythe blade, was flanked at the bridge by two close-set, piercing eyes. Padgett's hair was gray, but his close-clipped mustache was coal-black, and the contrast somehow had the effect of accentuating the implacable cast of his countenance.

Kirk stepped forward leisurely.

"You're right, Padgett," he stated. "This game, which you started and which I aim to finish, has come to a showdown. I reckon you aim to back up your hired man, Aug Mulhall, clean to the hilt."

"Mulhall will carry out my orders, same as he's been doing," Padgett snapped.

"So you take responsibility for all he's done?" Kirk nodded crisply. "I reckon that includes responsibility for the Cross R waddies hiding behind masks and making war on the women folks at the Four Springs Ranch."

Padgett glared down at him. "I don't know what in hell you're talking about—"

Kirk interrupted. "What's your game, Padgett? There's some reason behind the play your men have been making against the Widow Logan's ranch."

"You rangers is shore smart hombres," Padgett sneered. "You'll find out what my game is if you try to interfere with my cattle. You've made yoreself a nuisance in this country already. You ketched Aug Mulhall unawares, and gave him a trouncin' this morning. But I'm warnin' you, feller! Mulhall's out to get even. Next time you two meet, he'll shoot you like a dog."

"Thanks for the warning," said Kirk dryly. "Tell Mulhall he knows where he can find me. Maybe I'd better return the favor by warning you. Loco Joe Cass is still gunning for you. Taking right smart of a risk showing yourself in this country again, aren't you, Padgett?"

"I'm not afraid of that lunatic," growled Padgett. But his head jerked nervously, and he shot a furtive glance up toward the crest of Cuesta Peak.

"I reckon you've got some special play up your sleeve, else you wouldn't have risked coming back here," Kirk Howie commented shrewdly. "You're some scared of Loco Joe, and you've got a right to be. He's plumb crazy, and a crazy man is always dangerous. Sent Mulhall up a-looking for Cass this morning, didn't you, Padgett? You'd feel a heap easier if that madman was out of the way."

Padgett scowled. Things were not progressing as he had planned. He assumed a threatening attitude.

"See here, feller, you can't scare me. Figure to sic Loco Joe on me, do you? Let him come. Me and my men will be ready for all the lunatics and forest rangers in this country. I'm the big boss of these parts. I jest want you to

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understand what you're up against when you try to take my cows out o' this forest."

Kirk laughed coolly. "Your bluff don't go, Padgett. And your cows are coming off this forest range, regardless."

"You ain't got no authority—"

"I've got plenty." Kirk drew a document from his pocket. "Burr, the district forester, went before a federal judge and procured this court order. It commands the removal of your stock from the forest on account of non-payment of grazing fees. My job is to see that the order is carried out."

"Figger you'll hide behind the law, do you?" Padgett rasped. "I know all about that court order. It don't scare me none. To hell with the courts! You damn fool, you'll get shot full of holes for yore meddling. And the government won't erect no monument to yore memory after you're dead. Mebbe you don't savvy what you're buckin' up against. Mebbe you figure to get the local officers to help you. You'll find that I run this county, and that every man in office will do what I tell him."

"You've got me all wrong, Padgett," Kirk returned lazily. "I'm not looking for any outside help. I figure to play a sorta lone hand on this job."

"Lone hand, eh?" Padgett laughed savagely. "You actually mean you'll try to remove my cattle all by yoreself?"

"Those cattle are quittin' this forest, pronto," was Kirk's calm reply.

The ranchman whirled his horse and galloped away.

"I'll have a few orders to give my men when I get back to the Cross R," he yelled threateningly. "They'll be ready for yore play, feller!"

He rode out of view toward Oro Grande Canyon. But instead of continuing in that direction and proceeding immediately to the Cross R Ranch, he cut across the ridge to the west and dropped down into the small side canyon in which the Widow Logan's Four Springs outfit was located.

SIESTA BROWN was in a hurry. He came tearing down the canyon toward the Four Spring ranch house, his huge bulk swaying with the motion of his horse.

"Siesta's loping his horse," observed Becky Logan to her mother, spying the approaching rider from the doorway of the house. "That's plumb unusual for him. Someone must have woke him up a-sudden and scared him, or else he happened to remember it's getting along about supper time."

Becky had spent a busy day mending the fence that had been cut by the enemies of the ranch. Siesta had assisted her. An hour ago he had ridden after a bunch of stock that had strayed over on the forest range.

But Becky's deduction concerning the reason for the fat puncher's haste proved wrong.

"I knowed it was comin'," he panted lugubriously, reining up to the door. "It's gettin' so a feller can't get no sleep a-tall around this doggone ranch. I reckon from now on we'll have to set up nights so's to keep watch on them Cross R jaspers."

"What have they been up to now?" Becky broke in.

"Plenty," was the disturbing answer. "I found two of our young steers layin' dead jest acrost the forest boundary. They'd been shot, an', if yuh ast my opinion, it wasn't accidental."

The Widow Logan paled. "Some more of Mulhall's work, I reckon!" she said huskily. "Becky, it seems like we're at the mercy of these Cross R varmints. I ain't a woman to complain—but ain't it a hopeless proposition for us to try to run this ranch any longer? The Cross R outfit seems all set to drive us off the map."

Becky's brown eyes flashed. "The low-down snakes!" she choked angrily. "No—Mulhall is worse than a rattlesnake even; a rattlesnake generally gives warning before it strikes."

"We can't go on staying here," said her mother hopelessly.

"Why, we haven't even tried to fight

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back yet, Mom," was Becky's answer. "We won't give up without a fight."

But she realized the difficulties and dangers of attempting resistance to a sinister gang that attacked in the darkness and carried on depredation after depredation, guerilla-like, upon the ranch. If she only had a sure-shooting, nervy cowhand, instead of Siesta Brown, to aid her, she might have a chance fighting the Cross R crowd, Becky thought desperately.

She glanced over the ridge, toward the Oro Grande ranger station. She thought of Kirk Howie, the new ranger. She wondered if he had followed her advice and remained indoors to avoid meeting Aug Mulhall.

"I promised Mr. Howie I'd call him on the phone if the Cross R outfit caused any more trouble here," said Mrs. Logan.

"We won't call on *him* for help," said Becky decidedly.

"I guess you've still got a spite against him," her mother observed. "But I noticed you tried to help him out this morning, warning him over the phone that you thought Mulhall was riding on his trail. So I guess you feel sorta friendly-like toward the new ranger, after all, Becky."

Becky frowned. She was unable to explain the impulse that had caused her to telephone a warning to Kirk Howie that morning. Had she felt only pity for him, or had there been some deeper feeling that had led to anxiety over his safety? Kirk Howie had been in her thoughts all day.

"I like that Mr. Howie," declared the Widow Logan.

"Maybe I would have liked him if he hadn't backed down before Aug Mulhall. But after that—"

"Well, after that—"

"Well," said the girl in a queer, muffled voice, "I had hoped he wouldn't back down like he did. That ends it, I guess. Let's talk about something else."

Suddenly, Mrs. Logan grasped her arm, pointing down the canyon. Over a hill had come a stocky rider on a high-bred sorrel horse.

"George Padgett himself!" exclaimed the Widow Logan. "I haven't seen him in five years."

Siesta Brown, who had been shucking the saddle from his horse in the corral and had missed the conversation between Becky and her mother, now came lumbering back to the house. He gaped curiously at the newcomer.

Padgett stepped down from his horse.

"Howdy, Mrs. Logan," he said heartily. "It's been a long time since I had the pleasure of meeting you."

The widow eyed him aggressively.

"I didn't know Loco Joe Cass was dead," she said.

"Loco Joe Cass?" said Padgett. "What do you mean by that?"

"I didn't suppose you'd have nerve enough to show yourself in this country if he was still alive," replied the Widow Logan.

"I'm not afraid of that lunatic," Padgett declared irritably.

He ran his piercing eyes over Becky Logan, and mustered a paternal smile.

"So this is yore daughter, Mrs. Logan," he exclaimed. "All grown up into a young woman. And a fine-looking little lady, I must say!"

"Humph!" sniffed the "fine-looking little lady," audibly.

"Yes, indeed; a fine-looking little lady!" the Cross R owner repeated. "She ought to be in college, Mrs. Logan. It seems a shame to keep her here on a cow ranch. She ought to have a chance to develop her talents. And say, Mrs. Logan, I've got a proposition that ought to appeal to you. I want to add a little land to my other holdings, and I'm prepared to make you an offer for this ranch. Since you're an old neighbor of mine, I won't try to drive a bargain," he said magnanimously. "I'll give you fifteen thousand cash for the ranch—a fair price, you'll have to admit."

Becky and her mother exchanged glances.

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Suddenly the girl flashed, "So that's your game, Padgett! That's the reason you sent Mulhall coyoting around to cut our fences, and wreck our pipe lines, and kill our cattle and shoot up this ranch house! You want the ranch. And I reckon you thought it'd be easy to scare a couple of women so that they'd be plumb eager to sell out to you."

With an injured air, Padgett turned to Mrs. Logan. "Yore daughter seems to have a wild imagination," he remarked. "Where did she get all these locoed ideas about me, anyhow?"

"George Padgett, maybe you think you're a good actor, but it happens that your hired men have left a trail a rod wide," Mrs. Logan returned sharply. "Becky's right. You're trying to frighten me into selling you my ranch. Now that I come to think about it, you've worked such tricks before. You've always been a range hog. Most of your Cross R holdings have been secured through forcing nesters to sell out to you and by placing dummy entrymen on homestead lands. You claim you're offering me a fair price. But you know well enough that my ranch, with its good range and the most dependable water supply in this country, is worth at least twenty thousand."

Padgett laughed disagreeably. "You ladies are getting a mite hysterical," he jeered. "I've talked to Mulhall, and he told me how you had accused him of causing trouble here at yore ranch. I reckon the new forest ranger put that locoed idea into yore heads. Be sensible, Mrs. Logan. No matter who has been behind these attacks on yore ranch, you two women are in a sorta helpless position. Assuredly this is no place for a girl like yore daughter. Think of her—"

"Becky has a habit of thinking for herself," Mrs. Logan interrupted. "Still, I don't know—maybe—" She paused, and directed an anxious glance at the girl.

"I'm offering you fifteen thousand today," said Padgett meaningly. "Tomorrow my price will drop to twelve thousand."

"That's a threat, I reckon," said the widow, in a worried tone. "Becky, this is a hold-up, pure and simple. It makes me mad enough to fight. But, after all, a sale at fifteen thousand might be better than—"

"It makes me mad enough to fight, too!" broke in Becky Logan. "And we *will* fight before we let a pack of range hogs run us out of the country!" She faced Padgett defiantly. "I reckon that's your answer."

The ranchman glanced at Mrs. Logan.

"Yes," the widow exclaimed suddenly, her spirits reviving under the stimulus of Becky's declaration. "That's your answer, George Padgett! This ranch is not for sale."

Sullenly, Padgett climbed into the saddle.

"You've asked for trouble, and you'll get it plenty," he rasped. "Women seems to have the idea that they're entitled to extry favors; but you two won't get none from me. Jest remember that."

He rode away, spurring his sorrel horse viciously.

Mrs. Logan found her courage ebbing as she watched the ranchman go. If it wasn't for Becky, she wouldn't have felt so dubious about defying Padgett. She was of pioneer stock. The men-folk of her family had fought cattle thieves and marauding Indians. They had won their homes out of wild plains and wilderness, and had fought to defend them. The Widow Logan was stirred by a like determination to defend her ranch. But, on Becky's account, she found herself wishing that she had agreed to Padgett's proposal. Wouldn't it have been better to give up the fight, and accept Padgett's terms? She didn't want Becky mixed up in a range war with the powerful Cross R outfit.

Becky was speaking to her. "Are you a good shot, Mom?"

"I haven't had a gun in my hands in years," Mrs. Logan admitted.

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"Then you'd better practice up a bit," Becky warned grimly. "We ought to be ready for Padgett's next move. If we expect to make a fight, we'll have to know how to shoot."

Her mother shuddered. Yet she was proud of Becky's courage.

"I ought to be rustling up supper," she said abruptly.

"Wake me up when supper's ready," called Siesta Brown, collapsing wearily on the doorstep. "I'm plumb wore out with all the hard work I've done today."

A few minutes later, Kirk Howie came riding up to the ranch house. He beckoned Siesta to his side, and conversed with him for a few moments.

When Mrs. Logan and Becky appeared at the door, Kirk stepped toward them, saying grimly, "I happened to run across those two dead steers of yours over on the forest range a few minutes ago, Mrs. Logan. Siesta Brown here tells me you already know they've been shot. And he says that George Padgett has been here. It looks like Padgett has sorta exposed his hand."

"He aims to grab my ranch," said Mrs. Logan.

"But you refused to sell?" Kirk nodded.

"Becky did," chuckled Siesta Brown.

Then, as Mrs. Logan hurried back into the house to see to her cooking and Siesta Brown lumbered away to wash up for supper, Becky Logan found herself left alone with the new ranger.

Dusk was creeping upon the mountains. The wind whispered softly through the top of the big pine nearby. There was no other sound to break the evening's quietude.

Kirk stepped to the girl's side.

"Becky," he said, "promise me—promise that if Padgett and his outfit start any more trouble here at the ranch, you'll call me on the phone."

Becky was silent.

"I reckon you think it would be a waste of time," Kirk guessed, and a peculiar smile crossed his lean face. "You think I'm a helpless sort of hombre who wouldn't be any aid to you against the Cross R gang. You feel sorry for me, don't you? I reckon I ought to appreciate that—but I don't, Becky."

"Never mind what I think about you," the girl said, a bit confused. "I guess I should have kept my thoughts and opinions to myself, the first day I saw you. After all, even if you had tried to fight Mulhall, you would have had the whole Cross R outfit to contend with afterwards. I guess it oughtn't to be expected of you forest rangers to try to fight a big outfit like the Cross R."

"But *you've* decided to fight the Cross R outfit," Kirk reminded her.

"This ranch is my home," Becky said quietly. "I love it. I love these mountains, Kirk Howie. I don't want to leave them. I reckon it does look like a hopeless proposition—our little outfit trying to fight George Padgett. But we can try, and do our best. We'll never know what we can do until we try."

The last sun rays had gone. High up to the south rose Cuesta Peak, its timbered sides stretching like a mysterious purple band below the horizon. Even in the fading light Kirk could see the flash of the girl's brown eyes, proud and undaunted. "We will never know what we can do until we try." That was Becky Logan's code. It was by this code that she had judged him. She thought he had knuckled under to Mulhall without even attempting to fight.

"Becky," he said, his voice low and vibrant, "you're a game little kid! I'd give a heap to have you understand me better. And you're going to understand me better."

Deliberately yet firmly he took her hands in his.

"Listen to me," he commanded. "I love you, Becky! No use trying to keep it secret from you. I couldn't if I tried. I've loved you ever since the first time I met you."

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Becky Logan stared up at him, a look akin to fear in her eyes. Not that she feared Kirk Howie. But something warned her to take care lest, in spite of everything, she fall in love with this man who was telling of his love for her.

"Don't!" she half pleaded. Then, in sudden desperation, she jerked her hands free.

"Don't ever talk to me like that again," she cried, at last. "Why, I couldn't love a man like you!"

"I hope to prove up, Becky," was all the ranger said in reply.

He mounted his horse and rode away across the mountains. Becky watched him till his square-cut silhouette merged into the dusk.

"That feller's all right," Siesta Brown told her, after she had come slowly into the ranch house.

"Well, what of it?" Becky snapped crossly.

"Gosh, yuh needn't take my head off!" Siesta grumbled. And he said no more in praise of Kirk. But his admiration for the ranger was growing steadily. During their private conversation before the appearance of the women at the ranch house door, Kirk had told him that he planned to move the Cross R cattle off the forest range on the morrow. And Siesta opined that if Kirk attempted a move of that sort, it would bring him trouble a-plenty with the Cross R outfit.

CHAPTER V

Ambush!

MRS. LOGAN and Becky took turns standing watch through the lonely hours of the night. Their lookout point was a deep-embrasured window that commanded a view of the lower part of the canyon. Siesta Brown had gravely assured the women that he wouldn't sleep a wink that night; that he would stand guard at the little bunkhouse and keep his eyes trained toward the head of the canyon to watch for any further attempt at terrorism on the part of Padgett's Cross R outfit.

But the night passed uneventfully. If Padgett's men were continuing their prowling upon the Widow Logan's range, they had confined their operations to some point remote from the ranch house.

When Becky stepped from the doorway into the sunshine of a new morning, and gave the call to breakfast, she was surprised to find that Siesta Brown had disappeared. A moment later he came riding over a ridge from the direction of the ranger station.

"Gosh, I'm all tuckered out," he sighed, rubbing his eyes.

"Where have you been?" Becky inquired suspiciously. "Have you been hiding out somewhere all night, trying to keep at a safe distance from the Cross R gang?"

"Naw, sir, Becky," said Siesta indignantly. "I was right down in that bunkhouse all night long. Yessir, an' I didn't shet my eyes onct. It's hard to believe, but it's the truth. I'm a man that ain't never been bothered by insomny before," he admitted. "But last night somethin' warned me mebbe my life might depend on keepin' awake. 'If I go to sleep,' I tells myself, 'I may wake up to find myself dead, with Aug Mulhall standin' over me a-carvin' another nick on his gun.' But Mulhall an' his gang failed to show up, after all. So, long 'bout sunup, I slips over to the Oro Grande ranger station. I was sorta curious to see if Kirk Howie was still in the mind o' drivin' them Cross R cows out o' the forest."

"You mean Kirk Howie actually means to try that?" Becky gasped incredulously.

"Howie has got Bud Lacey, the ranger, from the Sulphur Crick station, with him, an' they've jest finished roundin' up all the Cross R critters in Bobcat Meadow," was Siesta's answer. "That Howie feller shore means business."

Becky stared at him. She was bewildered. Kirk Howie was an enigma to her. In appearance and speech, he

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seemed a man of nerve and resolution. Yet, on the only occasion she had had an opportunity to glimpse him in action, he had submitted to another's taunts and declined to fight. And that picture, graven deeply in her mind, did not coincide with that of a man who would dare undertake the dangerous duty which Siesta told about.

"Siesta," she said unsteadily, "are you sure Kirk Howie means to go through with that job? Why—we saw him back down before Aug Mulhall."

"Hey, what's that?" yawned Siesta sleepily. "Mulhall? Gosh, Howie would 'a' been crazy to fight Mulhall t'other mornin'. Didn't yuh savvy Mulhall's trap? He had a sharpshooter posted over behind a piñon on that hill yonder. Yuh didn't see him? An' Kirk Howie didn't tell yuh? Well, I'll be durned! Why, if Howie had tried to jump Mulhall, that feller with the rifle would 'a' drilled him instanter. Howie didn't have a chanct, the way it was."

"Siesta Brown, are you telling the truth?" Becky cried. Half smiling, half in tears, she caught the lumbering cowpuncher by the arm. "And Kirk Howie never told me! Just too proud, I reckon. He's not a coward, Siesta!"

"Coward—huh!" said Siesta Brown explosively. "Not him!"

Mrs. Logan, who was listening from the doorway, smiled brightly at Becky.

"Well, Siesta's story sorta removes all doubts about the new ranger," she observed. "It seems like Kirk Howie is the kind of a man you hoped he'd be, after all, Becky. But you two had better hustle in here. Chuck's on the table, a-waiting."

Becky Logan had no appetite for breakfast. After Siesta's disclosure, her first feeling of relief, strangely deep and glowing, had been swept aside by disquieting thoughts concerning Ranger Howie's preparations to remove the Cross R cattle from the forest.

Suddenly she sprang up from the table. "Siesta, did you see anything of the Cross R gang over on the forest range?"

"None whatever," replied Siesta, draining his third cup of coffee. "But I figger Padgett will try to stop the removal of the cows if he finds out about it in time."

"And Padgett will likely be on the watch for just such a move as Kirk Howie is making," Becky said anxiously, darting toward the door. "I'm riding down into Oro Grande Canyon for a look-see."

"Yuh mean—" began Siesta Brown, following her.

"Maybe I can find out whether Padgett is planning to stop Kirk Howie's play!"

Becky saddled up her cow-pony, a leggy blue roan, and went flying down the little canyon. Temporarily revived by three cups of coffee, Siesta Brown chose to accompany her. He was a man of large curiosity, and the prospect of excitement never failed to draw him, though he generally managed to take upon himself the rôle of onlooker rather than that of active participant.

A mile down the canyon, Becky suddenly reined her mount over to the left among some piñons, and beckoned Siesta to her side.

"Somebody's coming!" she told him. "It might be Padgett and his men."

They crouched behind the piñons. Ahead lay the broad floor of Oro Grande Canyon. A clatter of wheels sounded. A buckboard drawn by two mules came spinning up out of a dry wash. The driver was an angular, red-mustached fellow garbed in rough, ill-fitting clothes. At his side sat another man, middle-aged, cleanly shaven, somewhat spare of build, and having shrewd though not displeasing features. This man was dressed in a neat, dark business suit.

"Nawp, it ain't none o' Padgett's crowd," said Siesta Brown, peering between the piñon branches. "That feller with the red mustache is a liveryman from Horseshoe Gap. T'other feller looks like he might be a passenger. Do yuh reckon they're headin' up towards yore ranch, Becky?"

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But instead of heading up the side canyon in which the Four Springs Ranch was located, the driver turned his team to the right, and angled through the hills on the little-used trail that led past the Red Horse mine.

"Look!" exclaimed Becky Logan, pointing. "There's Mulhall and his gang."

Beyond the bed of Oro Grande Canyon rose the grassy mountain slopes which were part of Padgett's Cross R range. Five riders, Aug Mulhall and the Cross R cowhands, had suddenly appeared atop a pinnacle. They drew up their horses. Mulhall pointed across the canyon.

"Gosh, do yuh reckon they've seen us?" said Siesta Brown. "Mulhall's p'intin' our way."

Mulhall was conversing with his companions. One of the men turned back, and went galloping hurriedly away, to disappear among the broken slopes which hid the Cross R ranch house. With the other men, Mulhall came on. They crossed Oro Grande Canyon and headed toward the side canyon in which the ranger station was located.

"I reckon they didn't see us, after all," Siesta remarked to Becky. "But it looks powerful like they've got wind o' Kirk Howie's play, an' are gettin' ready to block it."

The Cross R men had disappeared from view. Becky led her horse on into Oro Grande Canyon. Glancing down its bed, to the east, she again glimpsed Mulhall and his followers. They had paused below the south slopes of the big canyon, had hidden their horses in a deep arroyo, and were now stretched flat on the ground behind a natural cover of rocks and brush.

Each man held a rifle in his hands. They faced the outlet of the side canyon which held the ranger station.

"Siesta, Mulhall's planning an ambush for Kirk Howie and the other ranger!" Becky jerked out, peering over a boulder toward the waiting men. "He figures Kirk will have to bring the cows down that side canyon. The forest boundary runs just above where Mulhall and his men are located. And Mulhall means that boundary to be a deadline. The minute Kirk starts to drive the cattle across, Mulhall and his men will start shooting!"

"Looks thataway," Siesta nodded. "An' I know Kirk Howie is headed down that side canyon with the Cross R cows. They'll show up before so very long."

"I'm going to tell Kirk—about Mulhall's ambush!" the girl flung out suddenly.

"Mulhall will stop yuh if yuh try to go up that canyon," warned Siesta.

"But I can go up the other canyon, past our ranch, and then cut across by way of the ranger station," Becky panted. "Maybe I can get word to Kirk in time."

A moment later, she was racing back toward the Four Springs Ranch.

Siesta Brown didn't accompany her. Hard riding had never appealed to the lazy puncher. Besides, his curiosity held him here. If a clash took place between Kirk Howie and the Cross R men, Siesta wished to witness it. The red sandstone boulder behind which he and Becky had crouched was one of several that lay close together, forming a sort of rocky mound at the edge of the canyon. And among those boulders was a sheltered nook, a place where he and his horse might hide without fear of detection. An ideal post for observation and safety, thought Siesta. He crept into the nook, leading his horse, and found a fissure through which he might peer down upon the ambushing Cross R men.

Meanwhile Becky Logan was urging her blue roan desperately. She left the trail before she reached the Four Springs Ranch. Cutting across the eastern ridge, she dropped down into the canyon in which the ranger station was located. In the bottom of the canyon she found fresh tracks made by the trampling of many hoofs. They

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told her that Kirk Howie and the Cross R herd had already passed this point, and were not far from the canyon's outlet.

She raced on. Suddenly, rounding a bend, she sighted a herd of Hereford cattle strung out in trail formation. Driving the herd were two riders, Kirk Howie and the freckled kid ranger, Bud Lacey. In addition to the holstered six-shooters strapped to their waists, both rangers carried Winchesters across their saddle pommels.

Plainly Kirk expected a fight, and was prepared for it. He turned in surprise as Becky galloped up behind him.

"Becky! What are you doing here?"

"Wait!" she panted. "Hold up the herd. Mulhall and three of the Cross R cowhands are lying in ambush just ahead."

She pointed. The leaders of the herd were only a few hundred yards from the outlet of the side canyon. Beyond lay the broad stretches of the big Oro Grande, with the slopes of Padgett's mountain range forming a wall for its northern side.

Kirk called to Bud Lacey: "Let the cattle drift a minute, Bud." Turning to Becky, he said slowly, "I'm sure much obliged to you for tipping me off about the ambush. I'd sorta expected something of the kind, but it's a big help to know just where Mulhall and his men are waiting. Now, you ride back home," he commanded her. "Bud and I will finish this job."

The girl's eyes throbbed mistily. She caught his arm.

"Kirk—you aren't going to go on with it, are you? Don't you see! You'll never be able to get the herd past Mulhall and his men."

Kirk smiled queerly. "Still taking pity on me—is that it, Becky? I hope you won't think I'm talking through my hat and putting up a grand bluff just for your benefit when I say I'm going through with this thing. It's my job. And, like you said last night, we never know what we can do till we try. I figure Bud and I can make a pretty good try, and hold our own against Mulhall and his men."

"Kirk," she burst out miserably, "I've been a doggone little fool! Siesta Brown told me this morning—about the trap Aug Mulhall tried to bait you into, that first morning you were at our ranch. And all this time I've let myself think you were afraid of Mulhall! Kirk—why didn't you tell me—about the man Mulhall had posted on the hill?"

Kirk Howie grinned broadly. His gray eyes devoured the slender, brown-haired girl at his side.

"Gosh!" he said. "So you've found me out! And you're glad, Becky, to learn that I'm not the helpless sort of hombre you first took me to be?"

"Of course, I'm glad," she said in a low voice. "But it makes me feel gosh-awful sheepish, after the way I've talked to you. I know you think I'm a regular fire-eater, and that I enjoy seeing men fight."

"I think you're the pluckiest girl I ever saw!" Kirk Howie declared positively.

"You're wrong," was her disconsolate answer. "I don't savvy how anybody can be as inconsistent as I am. I guess I've lost my nerve complete. All a-sudden, I've changed my mind about a lot of things. I've changed my mind about Tom Easley. I've about decided he did the only sensible thing possible when he refused to get mixed up in a fight with the Cross R outfit. The Government has no right to expect you rangers to carry out its orders against this kind of odds."

Ahead, the cattle herd was grazing along slowly. Bud Lacey, who had been a somewhat nervous though entirely determined young man all morning, sat his horse near the canyon slope, fingering his rifle and wondering what in the dickens was behind the interruption of the cattle drive. But Bud was too discreet a person to intrude on the private conversation between Kirk Howie and the girl rider from the Four Springs Ranch.

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Kirk reined nearer to Becky. Her face was half averted. The sunlight came down out of a clean blue sky. The wind sighed softly through the green cedars on the slopes. From down-canyon came the subdued shuffle of the herd.

"Becky," said Kirk, "you're not asking me to fall down on my job!"

"No, I don't want you to do that," the girl confessed huskily. "And still—I'm afraid for you to go on, Kirk."

His hand closed over one of hers.

"Don't be afraid," he told her resolutely. "But this cattle drive goes on."

He called to Bud Lacey.

"Bud, Mulhall and his cowpunchers are waiting for us. The minute we push the cows over the forest boundary, they'll probably start shootin'."

Bud nodded. "Well, let's go ahead and get this thing over with," he said grimly.

Becky pointed out the cover behind which the Cross R men were hiding.

"We'll shove the drags right up against the main part of the herd," Kirk said. "Flatten down on the neck of your horse, Bud. We'll keep close behind the drags. That way we'll be able to use the herd as a screen against the Cross R gunfire."

He turned to Becky. "Becky, you mustn't stay here. Ride on back to your ranch."

Becky Logan voiced no protest. She reined her blue roan horse, and rode slowly up the canyon.

"Gosh, it's a relief to know she won't be mixed up in this ruckus," thought Kirk Howie, as she disappeared behind the upper canyon bend.

And Becky, once past the bend, pulled up her mount, and said resentfully, aloud, "I reckon you're satisfied, Kirk Howie! But if you think I'm running away, you're badly mistaken."

Kirk and Bud began to drive the cattle. Leaning low in their saddles, they urged the drags of the herd onward, and presently the leaders were again on the move toward the forest boundary.

Suddenly the flat report of a rifle sounded. *Pinggg!* A bullet whistled past the ear of Bud Lacey, who had inadvertently raised up from the neck of his horse. A little ball of smoke floated up from a clump of brush just beyond the canyon's outlet.

Kirk Howie whipped out his six-shooter and emptied it into the air. Bud followed suit. They were not replying to the rifle shot. Their only object was to make a lot of noise. And their shots, booming and echoing through the canyon, had the desired effect. For the cattle, frightened at the tumult behind them, began a wild rush that was almost a stampede.

Again a rifle crack sounded. It became a forerunner of a chorus. Mulhall and his men were firing over the herd toward the two rangers. But they swiftly changed their tactics. The leaders of the herd were now only fifty yards from the forest boundary. Instead of the rifle cracks, now came the heavy boom of six-guns. Mulhall was attempting to check the near-stampede by the same sort of uproar that had initiated it. The herd leaders, terrified by the blasting tumult in their faces, rolled their tails and attempted to turn back. A moment later the entire herd was milling in a compact circle between the Cross R men and the two rangers.

"Take to cover, Bud!" Kirk yelled suddenly.

He whirled his horse to the left. Here, on a rocky point that formed one side of the canyon's outlet, were a few stunted cedars. Kirk spurred his horse up the slope to this rocky elevation. A rifle bullet snarled past him. But his horse clambered on. Kirk sprang from the saddle and dropped behind a clump of cedars.

Meanwhile Bud Lacey had performed a like maneuver, only he had chosen to take cover behind a low ledge of rock at the right point of the canyon. Stretched flat on the ground, the two rangers began pumping shots from their Winchesters, aiming at the smoke puffs which floated up from rocks and

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brush behind which the Cross R men were concealed. Mulhall and his companions had again taken up their rifles. Each smoke puff was accompanied by a spiteful report. Bullets tore the cedars and spattered the rocks which formed the stations of Kirk and Bud.

Meantime, it seemed that the cattle drive had reached an impasse. The herd continued milling. A bunch of longhorns would have stampeded wildly at the continuous firing. But the more domesticated Herefords only milled nervously, progressing neither in nor out of the little canyon. So far as the gun battle was concerned, it had assumed the nature of trench warfare.

"That one pinked me!" Kirk Howie muttered. A rock nearby had deflected the wild shot of a hidden Cross R marksman. The bullet had raked Kirk's forehead.

Suddenly he turned, startled by a rush of steps behind him. "Kirk!" cried a voice. "You're hurt!"

It was Becky Logan. She came rushing to his side.

"Becky!" he burst out. "What are you doing here? No, I'm not hurt. Just a scratch. I told you to go home!"

"I didn't go," she retorted. "I left my horse behind the canyon bend, and slipped down this ridge." She knelt beside him. "You're sure, Kirk, that you're not hurt?" she whispered.

His arm crushed about her. "Plucky Becky!" he said unsteadily. "No, I'm not hurt. But this isn't exactly a safe place at present. I wish you hadn't come." A bullet whipped the cedar behind which they knelt. Kirk said grimly, "You see, Becky? Bullets are a bit thick up here."

"I sorta figured they would be," the girl admitted.

"But you came anyhow!" he exclaimed wonderingly.

He poked his rifle between the branches of the cedar and again began pumping shots at the concealed snipers below. Suddenly he caught sight of two riders galloping across the bed of Oro Grande Canyon.

"George Padgett!" he muttered, recognizing the leader of the two. "And that's another Cross R man with him, I reckon. They've come to join Mulhall in the fight."

The odds seemed to be mounting against him and Bud Lacey. He wondered how Bud was coming along. Just now, it seemed that the Cross R men were concentrating all their fire upon the cedar which screened Becky Logan and himself. Bullets sang shrilly, spitefully, on all sides about them.

"You're all right, Becky?" he cried, glancing down at the girl.

She smiled gamely. "Of course."

Again he glanced down through the cedar branches.

"I don't savvy this!" he said suddenly.

George Padgett had crossed the Oro Grande, and was riding openly past his hidden men, toward the mouth of the little side canyon. He waved a white handkerchief above his head. His men had ceased firing.

Kirk watched the ranchman narrowly. Padgett came on, pushing his way through the compact bunch of cows.

"Howie, where are you?" he called.

"Right here," came Kirk's terse reply. "What's the big idea, Padgett?"

"The fight's off!" Padgett announced in a conciliatory, almost friendly tone. "I know when I'm licked, young feller. I figured I'd run a big bluff on you, but it seems my bluff didn't work. I've ordered Mulhall and the rest of my men to pull off to the other side of Oro Grande Canyon. As soon as you finish putting my cows off the forest, Mulhall and the boys will pick them up and drive them over to my private range. I won't bother you any more." And he repeated his previous statement. "I know when I'm licked."

Kirk gazed down skeptically at the man.

"This beats me, Becky!" he remarked in surprise, to the girl. "Padgett's sure changed his tune all a-sudden. Maybe he's got some new trick up his sleeve. But I reckon he means what he says

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about the cows. Bud and I will complete our job pronto."

CHAPTER VI

Siesta's Big Sleep

PADGETT made his word good. He rode back to his men and engaged them in conversation. A moment later Mulhall and the Cross R cowhands rose from their places of concealment, mounted their horses and rode sullenly away to the extreme northern side of Oro Grande Canyon.

Bud Lacey joined Kirk. The two of them broke up the milling of the Cross R herd and pushed it across the forest boundary into Oro Grande Canyon. At the boundary, Padgett himself took control of the cattle. He drove them across the canyon and turned them over to the waiting Cross R men. Before long the herd was disappearing among the broken slopes which made up the Cross R cattle range.

Of the entire Cross R outfit, Padgett alone remained. He rode back to the forest boundary, where Kirk, Becky and Bud were waiting. Noticing the presence of the girl for the first time, he gave a slight start. But as he reined up to the group, he ignored her entirely.

"Well, that's that, Howie," he remarked in a careless tone. "That ends my little quarrel with the Forest Service. I'll keep my cattle on their home range after this."

"That's that," agreed Kirk Howie calmly. The steady scrutiny to which his gray eyes subjected Padgett informed the latter that there would be no love feast to celebrate the coming of peace.

"Well, there's no hard feelings, I take it," Padgett said crossly. He glanced at his watch. "Ten o'clock! And I promised to meet a man in Rancho at ten-thirty. Adios."

He rode away west, skirting the slopes that led down from the south wall of Oro Grande Canyon.

"By golly, we made that old bluffer raise the white flag!" chuckled Bud Lacey gleefully.

He accompanied Kirk and Becky as they rode up the side canyon toward the ranger station. Suddenly Kirk spoke.

"Becky, I'm riding home with you. It just came to me that maybe Padgett was heading for Rancho and maybe he wasn't. He might have turned off up the canyon that leads to your ranch. And I'm some curious to find out if he's still in the mind to carry out his scheme of forcing your mother to sell out to him."

He ordered Bud Lacey to remain behind at the station and exercise vigilance to detect any possible attempt of the Cross R men to bring the cattle back to the forest range. For Kirk was not at all convinced that Padgett's sudden change of front was sincere.

With Becky he rode hurriedly over the ridge to the Four Springs Ranch. But Padgett was not there, and the Widow Logan said that she had seen nothing of him.

"That's the first time I ever heard of George Padgett admitting he was licked," Mrs. Logan commented joyfully, after she had listened to the story of the fight between the rangers and the Cross R men. "It sorta makes me feel that maybe *we've* got a chance fighting his outfit, Becky."

"Padgett is one hard hombre," Kirk warned. "I don't trust him none whatever. If he really needs more cattle range, he'll be more determined than ever to force you to sell your ranch to him, now that his cows are off the forest. Count me in to help you out in case he tries any more of his coyoting tricks on this ranch. I figure to do quite a bit of riding over this direction from now on."

On his way back to the ranger station, Becky rode with him for a short distance. They pulled up their horses on a cedar-topped hillock.

"Becky," said Kirk, after a moment's silence, "last night I told you I loved you."

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The girl's head was inclined. The brim of her sombrero shaded her face from the ardent rays of the sun.

"Yes," she whispered, and her brown eyes, warm and glowing, came up bravely to meet the man's.

"I didn't expect you to love *me* then," Kirk went on slowly. "And I don't expect you to love me now. You've known me only a few days."

"And you're right sure you love me after having known me only a few days, Kirk?" Becky's voice was barely audible.

Kirk Howie leaned close to her. "I loved you the first minute I saw you, Becky. And I'll keep on loving you forever!"

Her lips raised to meet his. "Kirk, you were mistaken in thinking I pitied you," she whispered. "I reckon the truth of it was that I didn't pity you at all—I was loving you all the time, and didn't realize it!"

A few minutes later she watched Kirk wave a good-by as he disappeared over the top of the ridge, toward the ranger station. In the quietude of the wooded mountains she was left alone with her day dreams. A cool breeze stirred the cedars about her. To the south, Cuesta Peak, a deep mysterious blue in which light and shadow mingled, rose up protectingly.

The girl smiled dreamily as she gazed at the familiar ridges and peaks. These were her mountains. The little canyon ranch, its intimate surroundings, and Kirk Howie—all had become a vital, inseparable part of her life.

FROM the rock-sheltered nook, Siesta Brown had witnessed the fight between the Cross R men and the two rangers. His position commanded a clear view of the Cross R sharpshooters, but he had been unable to see Kirk Howie and Bud Lacey. Consequently he had missed the parley between Kirk and Padgett. But the retreat of Mulhall and the other Cross R riders, and their departure to the Cross R range with the herd, enabled Siesta to surmise that Ranger Howie had come out victorious in the skirmish.

So engrossed was Siesta in watching the fight that he had failed to notice the return of the buckboard that had previously disappeared in the direction of the Red Horse Mine. Skimming down the trail, the red-mustached driver, who now rode alone, stared curiously toward the smoke puffs that told of the gun battle. But without pausing to watch or investigate, he turned his mules to the left and drove on to the west, up Oro Grande Canyon.

After the withdrawal of the Cross R men with the herd, Siesta Brown rose to his feet and stretched his arms, yawning.

"By golly, it looks like Kirk Howie has licked the varmints," he thought.

He stretched for a moment, and then collapsed comfortably against the smooth side of a boulder. The excitement had died. The sun was warm and soothing. Sleep, that precious boon which had been denied Siesta through the preceding night, was beginning to claim him. He curled up, head pillowed on arm, and closed his eyes blissfully.

A clatter of hoofs startled him. Peering out from his boulder-walled nook, he glimpsed George Padgett approaching. The stocky ranchman sent a glance behind toward the mouth of the side canyon that led to the ranger station. Then, apparently satisfied that no one was watching him, he reined his sorrel horse in behind the mound of boulders.

"Gosh, do yuh reckon he's a-hunting me?" thought Siesta. He pulled his gun. "Can't a feller get no sleep a-tall without bein' disturbed! Come on, Padgett. Dang yuh, I'll drill yuh squar' between the eyes if yuh come pesterin' me!" This aggressive invitation was entirely mental on Siesta's part.

But Padgett made no move to enter the sheltered nook. A few minutes later, three riders led by Aug Mulhall came dashing along the side of Oro

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Grande Canyon, from the west. They reined to Padgett's side.

"You're shore them rangers didn't see you come here?" Padgett rasped.

"Naw, they didn't see us," was Mulhall's answer. "We left a coupla boys in charge o' the cows, high-tailed it behind them ridges on t'other side the canyon, crossed 'way down to the west, an' then swung back thisaway, usin' that big arroyo fer cover. That was a fine stunt o' your'n, George," he snorted disgustedly. "Whyn't yuh let us go on with the fight? We'd 'a' wiped them rangers off'n the map if yuh'd 'a' let us alone."

"Don't be a fool!" Padgett said impatiently. "As soon as you sent me word about them two fellers heading up to the Red Horse Mine, I savvied I'd have other work for you to do, pronto. Anyhow, like I've told you before, I've been leery all the time that this gunplay idea of yores may get me in serious trouble with Uncle Sam. You're shore them two fellers went up to the mine 'stead of to the Widow Logan's ranch?"

"They went to the mine," returned Mulhall. "An' one of 'em come back down the trail while the fight was goin' on. He was a liveryman from Horseshoe Gap. I reckon the other feller is up to the mine now."

"It must be Whitney himself," Padgett muttered. "Listen, all you rannies. This is a big game I'm playing. I don't want Whitney running loose. We've got to nab him. We ain't got no time to lose. I want to finish up this deal, and get out o' the country pronto."

"Afeard Loco Joe Cass may find out yuh're here, huh?" commented Aug Mulhall a bit contemptuously.

"That lunatic is a dangerous man," Padgett growled. "And this new ranger is another one. Listen, the Logan girl was with him during the fight. Did you know that? It looks powerful like they're sorta teamin' up. If that's the case, Howie will horn in on this other game o' mine. We've got to figger out a scheme of getting him out of the way. And we've got to do it today."

"All I ast is a good chance—" struck in Aug Mulhall, his eyes glittering.

"We'll try to arrange it so's you'll get that chance," Padgett promised. "But first we've got to get Whitney corralled. Let's ride."

They galloped away, and headed up the narrow trail toward the Red Horse Mine.

From his place of concealment, Siesta Brown had listened to the conversation. It mystified him not a little. Who was this Whitney gent, anyhow?

"I'd kinda like to see what goes on up to that mine," Siesta decided, his unfailing curiosity whetted.

As soon as the Cross R men were out of sight, he dragged himself on his horse, and started out to follow them. But instead of traveling the trail, he headed up the side canyon toward the Widow Logan's ranch, and then cut across to the west. At last he reached a brushy flat. Dismounting, he crept to the edge of a broken slope, and peered down at a small cabin perched on its side. Here were the headquarters of the Red Horse Mine.

Padgett and his men had already arrived. Siesta could see them standing by their horses in a patch of cedar below the slope. At last Mulhall and the two Cross R cowhands left their employer, and climbed the slope to the cabin door. Padgett remained behind, hidden among the cedars.

Mulhall rapped on the door. "Anybody home?" he called.

The door opened. Out stepped the spare, middle-aged man who had ridden in the buckboard with the red-mustached driver.

"Yuh're under arrest, feller!" Mulhall announced suddenly, shoving his six-shooter into the other's stomach.

The man stepped back a pace. "Are you crazy?" he asked, running his eyes sharply over the squat gunman.

"Yuh're under arrest," Mulhall reiterated.

"On what charge?"

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"Suspicion o' bein' a cow thief that's been rustlin' stock over Green Timber way," Mulhall said glibly.

"I know you're crazy now!" said the man. "Do I look like a cow thief? My name's Whitney, and I'm president of the Red Horse Mining Company. Maybe you'd like to see some papers that will prove it."

"Yeah?" Mulhall jeered. "Yuh kin explain that later. Right now yuh're comin' along with us. We're takin' yuh to Pete Dowling."

"Pete Dowling? Who's he?"

"He's sher'ff o' this county," Mulhall stated. "We're depities workin' fer him."

"You're a bunch of chuckle-headed idiots," said the man in disgust. "I'm no cow thief. And you can't arrest me without a warrant."

"Can't, huh?" Mulhall sneered. "Yuh come along with us. An' if yuh make a single suspicious move, I'll blow daylight through yuh."

A few minutes later, he and his men rode away toward Oro Grande Canyon. The man Whitney was a prisoner, riding double with Mulhall. As soon as they were out of sight, George Padgett rose from out the cedar growths, mounted his horse, and followed.

"Huh!" said Siesta Brown to himself. "Looks like Padgett don't want that Whitney gent to savvy he was behind all this funny business."

He crept down to the cabin, and prowled around curiously. Entering, he seated himself on a cot and proceeded to think the matter over.

What kind of a game was Padgett playing, anyhow? What was behind this fake arrest? And why had Padgett made this remark to Mulhall: "You're sure he went to the mine 'stead of to the Widow Logan's ranch?"

Siesta rubbed his heavy eyes. "I'll ride to the ranch right away an' tell the widow about it," he resolved. "Yessir, an' I'll look up Kirk Howie pronto an' warn him that Padgett means to cook up some new mess o' trouble fer him."

A pleasant languor was creeping over him. The cot was springy and soft under his weight. Slowly his head slid down to the pillow and he stretched out gratefully.

"I was never so tired in all my life," he yawned. "Soon as I take a little nap, I'll ride to tell the widow an' Kirk Howie. Yessir—jest a little nap—"

He closed his eyes. And when darkness crept upon the mountains, the sound of snoring in the cabin told that Siesta Brown's little nap had become prolonged into a big sleep.

CHAPTER VII

Gunman Versus Ranger

AS the evening shadows were reddening the slopes of Oro Grande Canyon, George Padgett rode down to the little town of Rancho. He was accompanied by Aug Mulhall and a cross-eyed, bony gentleman who wore a sheriff's star and answered to the name of Pete Dowling.

In certain respects, the manner of this trio's entry was worthy of note. They came secretly, "by the back door," so to speak; slipping down from the north slopes, crossing the little canyon-stream between trails, and coming on cautiously through a peach orchard half hidden by brown adobe houses. They took care to hide their horses behind the board wall of a high corral. Then they parted company and proceeded separately by devious routes toward a common point, the post office.

Now both George Padgett and Aug Mulhall were hangovers from the violent early days of the range country, days when cattle barons claimed whatever land that happened to appeal to them, sent their cowpunchers maverick hunting, and engaged in vicious feuds with their neighbors for range rights and range supremacy. It had been a time when gun power ruled.

Padgett was quite as greedy and unscrupulous as Aug Mulhall, but he was more cautious and he possessed more brains than did his foreman. After

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killing Joe Cass' son in a range feud, five years ago, he had fled from the Oro Grande country. He was a man of imagination, and it made his flesh crawl to think of Loco Joe, a wild-eyed, cunning madman, keeping a ceaseless watch for him in the vicinity of Oro Grande Canyon. Mulhall, on the other hand, possessed no imagination; he feared neither law, devil or madman. He would not have fled from Loco Joe.

During his five years' absence from the Cross R Ranch, Padgett had gradually come to see that conditions were changing. The days of physical supremacy and gun rule were passing. To meet these changes, Padgett had strengthened his political connections and by adroit manipulations had managed to control the offices of the new county.

But now, after the clash between his men and the forest rangers, Padgett was impressed more than ever by the fact that the old days were gone and that a man could no longer defy the law with impunity. He had talked boldly, threateningly, to Kirk Howie at their first meeting. Yet all the time, he had secretly felt misgivings concerning his quarrel with the Forest Service, and had been dubious about attempting armed resistance to the removal of the cows. He didn't relish trouble with the Government. Still, against his better judgment, he had allowed Mulhall to start the fight.

Now he told himself that he had been a fool. He realized that once people of the country heard of the fight, his own prestige would suffer. The population of the canyon consisted mainly of Mexicans who ran sheep, raised peaches and apples, and tended patches of beans, chili and alfalfa. In the surrounding mountains dwelt a few American cowmen, owners of small herds. Apparently all these men had become resigned to Padgett's dictation in local politics. None had dared question his power, for none wished to incur the wrath of the Cross R outfit. Yet behind their submission had been a smoldering resentment, he knew. And now, when the news of the clash between the rangers and the Padgett men became broadcast, ranchmen and settlers would probably feel imbued with a new spirit on account of Kirk Howie's victory, and might become allied to bring a change in conditions.

Padgett realized, too, that his political power would soon be gone. By law, the new county was abolished, and its affairs were legally under the jurisdiction of Baca County again. Sheriff Pete Dowling was a usurper in office. If the people awakened to the fact and took action, his tenure would be of short duration.

The Cross R owner saw his power vanishing. He must act quickly, carry out the definite plans he had in mind, and do it in such a way that the law would not hold him accountable. With this thought in mind, Padgett had made a bargain with Aug Mulhall.

He came striding up to the post office, a thick-walled adobe building with a double-deck latticed gallery. A few Mexican residents of the town lounged nearby. Padgett nodded toward them, pulled a cigar from his pocket and began to smoke.

Thirty minutes later, a rider came jogging up the winding street of the canyon town. It was Kirk Howie, the new ranger. He pulled up his mount near the post office, and stepped to the ground.

"How are you, Howie," greeted George Padgett in a loud voice.

Kirk eyed him. "Howdy," he said briefly, and passed into the post office.

The postmaster, a fat, amiable, brown-skinned man, Perfecto Lujan by name, nodded a greeting.

Kirk introduced himself. "I'm Kirk Howie, new ranger up at the Oro Grande station. I've come for that registered letter you phoned me about."

Perfecto Lujan stared in puzzlement. "You are sure you not make the meestake?" he asked. "I no savvy what you talk about."

"Wasn't it you who called me up?"

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"No, meester."

"Haven't you got a registered letter here for me?"

"No, no. Ees no letter for you. Maybeso somebody ees try for play the joke on you, meester," said Perfecto Lujan.

Kirk's gray eyes narrowed. He glanced toward the door. An hour before, he had received a telephone call at the ranger station. A voice over the wire had stated that it was the Rancho postmaster speaking, and that he was holding a registered letter marked "Rush," addressed to Kirk Howie. The letter had arrived in the afternoon mail. Would Mr. Howie call for it? And Kirk had answered, "I'll be right down."

Kirk was satisfied that the postmaster was speaking the truth. The registered letter mentioned by the unknown caller was entirely fictitious, then. And George Padgett had been waiting outside the post office! Kirk had an idea that Padgett's mind had been behind the mysterious message.

"Sure," he told the postmaster in a careless tone. "Just a little joke."

But he was on his guard now. He shifted his gun slightly to the fore, and stepped to the door.

The sun had dropped beyond the western skyline. Twilight was beginning to settle upon the canyon. Padgett still stood outside the post office door. He wore no gun. Kirk Howie's eyes roved watchfully about, scanning the loungers closely and recognizing none of them. Was Padgett here alone?

The Cross R owner stepped up to him.

"Say, if I was you, Howie, I'd keep my eyes peeled for Aug Mulhall," he warned in a friendly tone. "He's gunning for you. I wouldn't be surprised if he's over on the forest range right now, waiting to get a pot-shot at you."

Kirk stepped from the threshold, his eyes boring toward Padgett. "That's your ranch foreman you're speakin' about, Padgett. How come *you* to warn me about his intentions?"

"I've fired Mulhall," Padgett announced loudly. "He disobeyed my orders in a number of things. I was aiming to put up a bluff about that grazing fee business—but a bluff was all the farther I wanted it to go. Jest because Mulhall bore a private grudge towards you, he started that fight this morning, all without my sanction. I'll be damned if I let Mulhall get me into trouble with the Government! He's out of my hire now, and I'm going to get me a new foreman to take his place."

Kirk was unconvinced of Padgett's sincerity. The latter's statement seemed calculated to impress the listeners of his uprightness; in short, he was disavowing publicly all responsibility for Mulhall's future acts and washing his own hands by means of an apparently friendly warning.

"That hombre's got a wolf's cunning," Kirk thought. "I'll give him credit for the truth when he says that Mulhall's gunning for me, and I'll mark down the rest of his talk as lies. Which means that Mulhall's still in Padgett's hire. And instead of being over on the forest range lying in wait for me, as Padgett hints, I wouldn't be surprised if Mulhall is close at hand right now. There was reasons a-plenty for that fake telephone call that brought me to Rancho."

His eyes swept the opposite side of the street. A few adobe houses lay there in the soft twilight. Their walls and corners would offer good cover for Mulhall or the Cross R cowhands, were they planning an ambush. Or the side walls of the big adobe post office, or those of the adjoining buildings, might even now be sheltering unseen marksmen.

Kirk decided it might be possible to make use of George Padgett in locating the suspected trap. Two swift steps brought him face to face with the Cross R owner.

"Thanks for warning me about Mulhall," he said laconically. "I'll be ridin' now."

His horse stood but ten paces away.

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If Mulhall or the Cross R men were lying in wait nearby, he reflected, Padgett would move in a direction that would enable him to escape the line of gunfire. Accordingly, when Padgett began to back up hurriedly, toward the horse, Kirk decided that there was nothing to fear from the opposite side of the street.

The ranger sent a glance over his shoulder. Suddenly he whirled, his body tensing.

With a guttural roar, Aug Mulhall had come leaping around the corner of the post office. In his hand was the black-stocked six-shooter that had established his record as a gunman. His leap was pantherish. He caught his balance, and whirled to face the man he was seeking. In the dusk his eyes gleamed with that savage light that shows in the orbs of an infuriated mountain cat.

Mulhall called out no threats, gave no warning. His sudden appearance brought a gasp from the onlookers, who drew back hastily.

It was a swift, changing picture—the squat gunman swinging his gun to bear on the wiry ranger who, in turn, was whipping a six-shooter from his own holster.

A crashing report shook the air. An angry stripe of orange flame spewed out between the two, answered, too late, by another. Two shots only. And the first had come so swiftly and accurately that the second was rendered ineffectual.

The smoke of the two guns seemed to merge in one floating cloud. Kirk Howie's hat had jumped back on his head, its crown bullet-torn. But he stood erect, staring down through the smoke fog at Aug Mulhall, who swayed, clawing at the air, and then pitched forward on his face.

"Aug Mulhall ees one dead hombre," one of the Mexican watchers jerked out excitedly, after he had run to the side of the fallen man.

Kirk backed slowly toward the door of the post office. His gun was still in his hand. Suddenly he snapped out at George Padgett, who, astounded and stunned, was staring down at the prone figure of the gunman.

"That trap failed, Padgett! Mulhall was quick with his shot—but not quite quick enough. Any more of your men coyoting around here?"

Padgett shook himself together and stepped toward the door.

"You ain't got nothing to fear from my men," he protested. "And I've already told you I fired Mulhall this morning. Why, I jest warned you a minute ago to be on the lookout for him."

His eyes twitched, gleaming queerly. He stared past Kirk, into the post office. All at once Kirk Howie felt a hard object jam into his back.

A voice behind him commanded. "Hands up, feller! Drop that shootin'-iron."

Kirk hesitated. Then he allowed his gun to drop to the ground, and raised his hands.

"Now," ordered the voice behind him, "bring them hands down, behind yore back."

The hard object, a gun, kept jabbing into the ranger's back to emphasize each word. He detected a triumphant glitter in George Padgett's eyes.

"You've got me," he said calmly, and he was speaking to Padgett.

He reached his hands behind his back, and felt the touch of cold steel as handcuffs were snapped on his wrists. He turned for a look at his captor, and found him to be a bony, cross-eyed man he had never seen before.

"I'm Sher'ff Dowling," announced this person, displaying his badge. "I hereby arrest yuh fer the killin' o' Aug Mulhall. I'll l'arn yuh forest rangers that yuh cain't come into town an' commit murders promiscuous-like thisaway!"

One of the onlookers remonstrated, "But Mulhall come at him with his gun out—"

"Shet up!" Dowling roared. "I'm

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sher'ff o' this county, an' I aim to enforce the law."

George Padgett interposed, "Now, Sheriff, don't be too hard on this ranger. It's true that Aug Mulhall was gunning for him—"

"Don't try to argy with me, Mr. Padgett," said Pete Dowling, so truculently that Kirk was led to suspect the man was playing a part calculated to mislead the bystanders. "Makes no difference to me if this forest ranger happens to be a friend o' yourn. I'm goin' to lock him up."

An hour later, Dowling and his handcuffed captive rode up to a dim house that lay among the hills west of Padgett's Cross R cattle range. It seemed that the Rancho jail had burned down a couple of months before. And Dowling had announced his intention of taking the ranger to an unnamed place which offered advantages for the confinement of a desperate prisoner. Evidently this house was the place he had referred to.

The building was a long, steep-gabled, two-story frame structure, evidently an abandoned ranch house. The windows were broken out. Along the front, from each corner ran a flight of rickety outer stairs. These two stairs met, like an inverted V, at a door that opened on a small gallery above.

"Git down off'n that hoss," Dowling commanded Kirk roughly. "This yere's my jail."

He prodded his gun into the ranger's ribs and marched him inside the house. It was plain that he meant to exercise all vigilance against allowing his man to escape.

"I'll have to take a chance," Kirk thought desperately. "I've got to get away from this place and go to the Logan Ranch."

George Padgett had taken great pains to convince the onlookers at Rancho that he had had no part in Mulhall's attack or in Kirk Howie's arrest by Dowling. But, unable to restrain a goading comment, he had momentarily dropped his mask to Kirk.

Just before the ranger rode away with Dowling, the Cross R owner had whispered harshly in his ear:

"Seems that you're sorta teamin' up with the Logan girl, huh? It won't be long till she'll be wonderin' what's become o' her han'some young ranger, and why he don't show up and offer his help. And she'll be needin' help a-plenty!"

CHAPTER VIII

"Spyin' on Me, Huh?"

SIESTA BROWN sighed plaintively. A shaft of moonlight entered the open door of the Red Horse mining cabin and showed him still stretched out on the cot that had offered such enticing possibilities for repose. He yawned, and feebly pawed an enormous hand through his hair. His eyes opened. Gradually he oozed into a state of wakefulness and gazed stupidly about the room.

"By gosh!" he thought. "Where in Sam Hill am I at?"

Then he remembered.

"Dang it," he muttered in alarm. "I must 'a' overslept. An' there was two things I aimed to do pronto. I was gonna tell the Widow about those goin's-on at this mine. An' I meant to warn Kirk Howie that Padgett was plannin' to cook up a fresh batch o' trouble fer him. I better be ridin'!"

He scrambled outside the cabin. A strong wind was swishing through the black patches of cedar nearby. The moon rode high in the heavens. In its light, Siesta went hurrying up the broken slope. His horse, tied to a stunted piñon, still stood on the flat above.

Siesta swung into the saddle. He crossed the flat and then cut across a series of slight elevations. A few minutes later, passing up a draw, he came into the side canyon at a point near the Four Springs Ranch headquarters.

As he loped past the corral, he detected a dim shape dodging out of sight behind a corner of the bunk-

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house. Siesta whipped out his gun and floundered from the saddle.

"Come out from behind that bunkhouse, dang yuh, whoever yuh are," he yelled, dropping down behind a log water trough. "I seen yuh. Come out an' surrender, afore I fill yore hide full o' hot lead!"

From the ranch house came Becky Logan's voice.

"It's Siesta!" And she called, "What's the matter down there, Siesta?"

"I've ketched a feller coyotin' round," Siesta answered in a voice that shook the mountains. "I got him treed. One o' them Cross R varmints, I reckon! I bet this ranch is plumb alive with 'em right now. But they don't skeer me none." And he yelled threateningly toward the bunkhouse, "Come out o' there, dang yuh!"

Obligingly, a man stepped out from behind the small building. He carried a long rifle in one hand. His thin figure was bent slightly forward.

"Don't be scairt," he said calmly. "I could 'a' kilt you jest now, but I held my fire. I ain't got no grudge ag'in you, Brown. It's George Padgett I'm after. Have you seen him?"

Siesta stared, fascinated, chilled by the man's cunning, bright-gleaming eyes.

"Why—it's Joe Cass," he jerked out.

Becky Logan and her mother came hurrying down from the main house.

"Where have you been all day, Siesta?" the widow asked. "And what do you mean scaring me half out of my wits by hollering that the Cross R men are snooping around again?"

"I mistook Joe Cass here for a Cross R waddy when I first spied him," Siesta admitted.

Loco Joe fastened his gaze upon the two women.

"Howdy, Missus Logan. Howdy, Becky. George Padgett's come back to this country. I'm a-lookin' for him. Figgered I might find him here. Don't be scairt," he said reassuringly. "Folks says I'm crazy, but I ain't."

His eyes roved about from one moonlit slope to another. "Figgered I might find Padgett here," he repeated monotonously. "I seen Bud Lacey this evenin' up by Cuesta Peak. He was ridin' on his way back to the Sulphur Crick ranger station. He done told me that Padgett was back in this country, an' about the scrap him an' Howie had with the Cross R outfit. Bud Lacey says Padgett is tryin' to skeer you into sellin' him yore ranch, Missus Logan. I thought mebbe he'd show up here to-night. But I guess he ain't a-comin'."

Mrs. Logan shivered, whispering to Becky, "Much as I hate George Padgett, it makes the cold chills run up and down my back when I hear this poor, demented critter talk about getting revenge on him."

To Loco Joe she said abruptly, "Now see here, Joe, you just go back to your hangout and stay there. George Padgett hasn't been here to-night, and I don't believe he's coming. Forget all these wild ideas about—"

"Forgit?" Loco Joe laughed wildly. "Didn't Padgett kill my boy? Kin I forgit that? I've spent five years rememberin'—an' a-waitin'. My chance has come. Don't you worry none about havin' to sell yore ranch to Padgett, Missus Logan. I'll settle my score an' yores. I'm a-ridin' to the Cross R Ranch!"

He whirled abruptly, and glided over among the piñons nearby. Mounted on a horse, he reappeared, and galloped away down the canyon.

"Good-by, Loco Joe!" said Siesta Brown to himself. "And if he finds Padgett, it'll be 'Good-by, Padgett'!"

Siesta now turned to the women and gave an account of his day's adventures.

"I don't know this man Whitney you speak about," the widow said wonderingly. "Seems funny that Padgett wanted to capture him thataway. I don't see what made Padgett think Whitney had any intention of coming up to my ranch. Connected with the Red Horse mining outfit, Whitney is,

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you say? The mining engineers that were located there last month used to come up here to get their drink water. But I don't recall any man named Whitney."

"Kirk Howie been here recent?" Siesta inquired of a sudden.

Becky answered. "Not since noon. I'd half expected him over this evening, but he didn't come."

"I aimed to see Howie afore this, but I sorta overslept," Siesta admitted. "I overheerd Padgett an' Mulhall hatchin' up some kind of a scheme ag'in him. Padgett means to go ahead with his plan to get hold of this ranch. But he wants to get Kirk Howie out o' the way first, so's to make shore that Howie won't jine up with this outfit in fightin' him. I reckon I ort to call Howie on the phone, so's to give him warnin' to be on the lookout."

But Becky, alarmed at his statement, had already darted into the house, and was at the telephone. She rang the Oro Grande ranger station signal three times—three long rings followed by two short ones. There was no answer.

"Gosh, it looks like he ain't at the station," Siesta muttered, at her elbow.

White-faced, the girl turned to him. "No—maybe it's too late to warn Kirk now. I just wonder if the reason the Cross R outfit hasn't bothered us tonight is because they've been busy trying to get Kirk out of the way."

She rushed to the door, ran to Siesta Brown's saddled horse, and fairly leaped into the saddle. Mrs. Logan hurried after her.

"Becky," she began uneasily.

"I'm going to the ranger station," Becky told her determinedly. "Maybe I can find out what's happened to Kirk."

She whirled the horse up the eastern ridge and raced on. The strong wind howled in her ears. The moon, cold and bright, hovering overhead, showed her the way.

"And they planned to get you out of the way just because they were afraid you would help *us* out, Kirk," she thought, half in tears. "Is this the kind of a price you've had to pay for loving me?"

From a small cove she came down at last into the cleared space in which sat the ranger station. Suddenly she pulled up the horse and reined in behind a clump of evergreen.

The moon showered its glow down upon the clearing. The little log ranger cabin showed distinctly. Had Becky ridden on, she would have met face to face with another rider, a man, who came galloping up the canyon.

Kirk—was it Kirk? thought Becky eagerly. Then this hope was dashed down when the rider approached nearer. She recognized him. It was George Padgett.

Padgett dismounted, sprang over the picket fence, and approached the door of the ranger cabin.

"Lacey, are you there?" he called.

There was no answer. Padgett boldly pushed open the door and entered. A few minutes later he reappeared, carrying what seemed to be a bundle of newspapers. He mounted his horse and rode up the canyon in the direction of Cuesta Peak.

The minute he was out of sight, Becky rode down to the cabin. She hurried inside. The interior was unlighted, but the moonbeams showering in at the windows enabled her to make a swift and thorough examination of the three rooms. There was no sign of Kirk Howie.

"Padgett knows where Kirk is," the girl decided. "He was afraid maybe Bud Lacey was still here, else he wouldn't have called Lacey's name before coming inside. But just from the way he acted, he didn't expect to find Kirk here."

And did that mean that Padgett had succeeded in his plan to put Kirk out of the way? The girl shuddered as she gazed about the silent room. "Kirk!" she whispered. The wind, whistling and moaning through the trees outside, was her only answer.

Suddenly Becky ran out to her horse.

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"Padgett knows what's happened to Kirk," she said to herself, desperately. "Maybe I can find out if I follow Padgett."

She galloped up the trail toward Cuesta Peak. Padgett had gone this way. Soon the trail narrowed. Pines began to flash by, singly at first; then they came in dense growths on both sides, rising tall against the sky, shutting out the moon, so that the trail ahead seemed but a wedge of black.

All this time Becky Logan had seen nothing of the man she had set out to follow. At last, reaching a clean little alpine park which the moonbeams penetrated, she pulled up her mount. A group of cabins lay back among the pines. This was the Cuesta Mountains summer resort, a favorite retreat for townspeople during the summer season. The cabins were now unoccupied.

As she gazed toward them, Becky heard the neigh of a horse nearby. Swiftly she sprang to the ground, gripping the muzzle of her mount lest he neigh in answer. Her eyes glimpsed a red streak of flame flickering in the timber behind the cabins.

She crept forward, leading her horse. And she found George Padgett.

In a small cove behind the cabins was a brush-grown region which was the beginning of the heavy timber that swept on up to cover the sides of Cuesta Peak. At the head of the cove sat a single summer cabin, detached from the main group. As Becky crept on, she saw the red stripe of flame rise again. It seemed to be only a few yards away now. Peering through the brush, she spied the shape of a man. He was crouched forward, and in his hand was a torch evidently fashioned from a newspaper. The flames illuminated his features.

Becky recognized George Padgett. He was sweeping his crude torch along near the ground, setting fire to the dry brush and thick clusters of pine needles that had heaped there.

"Looks like he's trying to start a forest fire!" Becky thought incredulously. "What's his game?" Drawing her gun from its holster, she decided to find out.

Just then, the neigh of the horse again sounded. Becky reached out to grasp the muzzle of her mount, but already he had let out an answering whinny—enough to put George Padgett on his guard.

The man dropped his torch and sprang back into the shadows.

"Who's there?" His rasping voice rose against the wind.

Becky barely heard him. She knew by gaging the wind's direction that any sound she made would be carried to his ears, while if his suspicions had been thoroughly aroused and he circled down through the brush to investigate, he might come upon her unexpectedly without her hearing his movements. The darkness gave even odds, but the wind was very much in Padgett's favor. Becky realized the danger of delay.

Springing astride her horse, she turned its head toward the alpine park. At the same time a six-gun boomed. Padgett was shooting at her.

Startled by the shot, the horse plunged frenziedly to the right among the dense growths of trees. Too late, Becky saw a low-hanging limb directly ahead. She tried to dodge, and at the same moment kicked free from her stirrups. The last move saved her from being dragged to death by the frightened horse. For that low-hanging limb swept Becky Logan completely out of her saddle. The rough ground seemed to rise up and smite her.

Then she knew no more till her eyes opened several minutes later, and she discovered George Padgett bending over her.

"You little fool!" said the man harshly. "You've been spying on me, huh?"

Becky's head was throbbing painfully. She tried to sit up, but she found that Padgett had bound her wrists and ankles tightly with a piece of rope.

She sank back, but her eyes blazed

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contemptuously up at George Padgett.

"And you're a little bit afraid for anybody to catch you starting a blaze in the National Forest—is that it, George Padgett? There's quite a penalty attached to that kind of an offense."

Padgett glared down at her. Then, without a word, he strode up the cove a few yards and began stamping out the fire he had started.

"Well, the fire's out now," he snarled at Becky, returning. "You haven't got a thing on me."

The fact was that George Padgett had been greatly upset by the preceding events of the day. He had planned to have Mulhall kill Kirk Howie and quench the young ranger's troublesome activities for all time. But the scheme had back-fired. True, Kirk was a prisoner, and in no position to interfere with the completion of Padgett's schemes. But the latter had depended on Mulhall for further aid, and now Mulhall was dead. Against Howie, who had been responsible for the gunman's demise, Padgett nourished a blind, bitter rage.

No doubt this rage had something to do with Padgett's attempt to start a fire in the National Forest over which Kirk had charge. He hoped that in case of a disastrous fire, the Forest Service would hold Kirk accountable for not being on hand to spot it. Again, there was a chance that the fire, spreading up into the thickets of Cuesta Park, might trap Loco Joe Cass and remove for all time the danger of the madman's vengeance.

These were the wild, rage-inspired thoughts of a man overwrought. But more rational, perhaps, had been Padgett's idea that a timber fire would serve to draw every available man of the community to the forest. And while they were busy fighting the flames, high up on the slopes, he would have an opportunity to complete his designs against the Logan Ranch without fear of interruption from anyone.

But now, his act detected, Padgett told himself that it had been ill-advised and rash. Still, he thought, though he had put out the fire, the attempt hadn't resulted so badly, after all. It had brought Becky Logan into his hands.

"Padgett," Becky was demanding huskily, "what has happened to Kirk Howie?"

Padgett noticed the appeal in her voice, and he took cruel satisfaction in lying to her.

"Yore han'some young ranger's dead," he said roughly. "Aug Mulhall killed him."

A low moan of horror burst from the girl.

"Shut up," Padgett commanded. "It won't do you no good to shed tears over that Howie feller."

He lifted Becky in his arms and stumbled up the cove to the cabin which sat at its head. Smashing open the door, he carried the girl inside. A moment later he left her, remarking triumphantly:

"Yore mother ort to be plumb tickled to sell her ranch for ten thousand dollars and the privilege of havin' her daughter back again. Anyhow, that's the kind of a proposition I aim to make to her."

CHAPTER IX

Handcuffs and Rawhide

WITH Pete Dowling's gun jabbing into his back, Kirk Howie had entered the abandoned old ranch building that lay among the hills west of the Cross R range.

"Lay down!" Dowling ordered. He bound Kirk's legs with a piece of rawhide, and then retired into the shadows across the room, remarking, "I'll jest camp here, where I kin watch yuh but yuh cain't see me."

Stretched on the floor, Kirk sent a roving glance about him. The room was long and narrow, running across the entire width of the house. Through two broken front windows the moonlight came streaming, so that the room was half light, half shadow. Kirk lay

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in one of the lighted areas. Rolling over on his left side, he was surprised to find himself facing another man, who, like himself, lay bound on the floor, a prisoner.

The man was a stranger to Kirk. He was not a large man, and he was not garbed after the usual fashion of the range country. His features were plainly revealed in the moonlight. He looked at Kirk. His eyes flashed a warning, and he uttered a "Sh!" that was barely audible.

Kirk Howie was mystified. There were a number of questions he would have liked to ask his fellow prisoner. But the latter's cautioning "Sh!" caused him to remain silent. So Kirk took the cue, and rolled over on his right side again, pretending not to have noticed that Pete Dowling's improvised jail held another prisoner besides himself.

A few minutes later, a thud of hoofs announced the coming of visitors. Pete Dowling sprang to the door. A glance at the bound men seemed to convince him that it would be safe to leave them unattended. He hurried outside. Presently his voice sounded in subdued conversation with the new arrivals.

Kirk rolled over on his left side again, and stared into the face of the man who lay near him.

"Now we can talk," the man whispered eagerly. "I was afraid to start any conversation while that fellow was in here. Thought he might try to shut us off by gagging us, Listen, is he a real sheriff? I never heard tell of a jail like this before. It looks to me like somebody's framed up on me, for some reason."

"They say that Pete Dowling isn't really entitled to office," Kirk answered. "He's supposed to be in Padgett's pay."

"Padgett?" echoed the other. "You mean George Padgett, the lumberman?"

"Lumberman, ranchman, politician—Padgett's supposed to dabble in a number of things. He owns the Cross R Ranch, located not far from here."

"I know George Padgett," the man frowned. "And this sheriff is in Padgett's pay, eh? My name's Whitney. I'm president of a company that recently bought the Red Horse Mine, across the canyon. I came here to-day from Silver Ledge. I've been at Silver Ledge for a couple of weeks, looking after another mine I hold a partnership in. I saw Padgett only a few days ago. He's interested in a lumber company that's been cutting in the Geronimo Forest down by Silver Ledge."

"Padgett showed up here a couple of days ago," Kirk informed him.

"Do you happen to know what he's doing here?"

"He's been cutting some didoes with the Forest Service, for one thing. But I reckon his main play is to force a ranchwoman to sell her property to him."

"A ranchwoman?" Whitney struck in. "What's her name?"

"Mrs. Logan. She owns the Four Springs Ranch."

"Four Springs Ranch!" Whitney said excitedly. "That explains everything."

He told Kirk about his capture by a gang of men, unknown to him.

"A couple of weeks ago," he said, "I sent a mining engineer with a couple of helpers to make a thorough examination of the Red Horse Mine. He brought me his report in person only a few days ago. According to his findings, the Red Horse Mine is due to become one of the best paying gold diggings in this part of the country. He has figured out a special type of machinery to handle the dirt. The only drawback to his plan is the total lack of water on the working grounds. But he assured me that at the Four Springs Ranch is a water supply quite ample for the mining operations. If I can harness up that water and pipe it to the Red Horse, the success of the mine is assured. And I came down here for the special purpose of opening negotiations with Mrs. Logan for the purchase of her water-right."

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"I reckon that explains George Padgett's big game!" Kirk interjected grimly. "I savvy now why he's been trying to scare the Widow Logan into selling her ranch to him. He's probably been tipped off—"

"Exactly! He's got wind of the engineer's report somehow. This fake arrest is a scheme to keep me from seeing Mrs. Logan. He doesn't want her to learn how valuable her water-right is. He knows I'll be willing to pay thousands of dollars for the water alone. If he succeeds in getting possession of the ranch, he'll force me to pay an outrageous price."

Kirk's teeth clicked together. There was more behind Padgett's game than he had imagined. Padgett was playing for big stakes, and would resort to any method in order to win. He recalled Padgett's threat: "It won't be long till that Logan girl will be needin' help a-plenty."

"Whitney," the ranger said desperately, under his breath, "we've got to stop Padgett's game. You handcuffed, too? That makes it bad! But we'll have to take what little chance we've got—before Dowling comes back. Roll over toward me. See if you can do anything with these rawhide thongs around my ankles. Try to unloose the knots with your teeth. If I can get my legs free, I'll tackle Dowling."

"With your hands manacled?" Whitney muttered. "Don't be foolish. That fellow will kill you."

"Hurry," Kirk commanded. "It's a long chance, but it's worth trying. Maybe I can take Dowling by surprise when he comes back in here—rush him and knock the wind out of him before he savvies what's going on."

Whitney set to work, tearing at the ranger's ankle bonds with his teeth. The knots were tight. They resisted the groping, gnawing attack.

"I'm not getting anywhere," Whitney mumbled. "If my hands were loose—"

"Keep a-trying," Kirk Howie urged. He turned his head slightly, listening. From outside had come the sound of retreating hoofs. Dowling's visitors were riding away. "Hurry!" Kirk told Whitney.

But already Pete Dowling's bony figure was outlined in the doorway.

"What's this?" he rasped. Stepping forward, he landed a vicious kick in Kirk's ribs, and then repeated the assault on Whitney.

"So yuh two fellers got real friendly-like while I was outside, huh? Figgered yuh'd help each other git loose, did yuh? Why, yuh pore idjits ain't got a chanct to get away from me! But mebbe I'd better muzzle yuh, so's to make shore yuh don't holler or hatch up any more cute idees between yoreselves."

Untying a bandanna from around his neck, Dowling thrust it gag-wise into the ranger's mouth.

"Looks like we haven't got a chance, partner," Whitney groaned.

The gag stifled Kirk Howie's answer. He was berating himself for ever allowing himself to fall in Pete Dowling's hands. The coming of those unseen riders a moment ago had an ominous significance, to his way of thinking. Padgett's cowhands, probably. Maybe Padgett had been with them. Maybe they had stopped off at the old house on their way to the Logan Ranch. Or it might be that they had already been to the Logan Ranch, had accomplished Padgett's aims, and were now returning to the Cross R.

Kirk strained desperately at his bonds. No use. Handcuffs and rawhide held him impotent.

Suddenly his body tensed. His eyes were turned toward the door. Across the threshold had glided a thin figure of a man. He came noiselessly, catlike. Pete Dowling, who had stooped to place a gag between Whitney's jaws, had not seen nor heard him.

"It's that crazy hombre, Joe Cass!" Kirk thought.

"Hands up there, Dowling!" The command was determined, harsh. Loco Joe Cass was covering Dowling with a long rifle.

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Dowling whirled. His hands fluttered into the air.

"Cass!" he gasped. "What in hell yuh doin' here?"

Loco Joe cackled triumphantly.

"I could 'a' killed you, Dowling, but I held my fire," he said. "George Padgett's the man I'm a-lookin' for."

"Padgett ain't here—" Dowling began.

"Shut up," ordered Loco Joe ominously. "I'm goin' to tie you up, and turn these two fellers loose."

And he did. A moment later, their gags removed, the handcuffs unlocked with the key which Loco Joe took from Dowling, their ankle bonds severed, Kirk Howie and Whitney rose from the floor, free again.

"You're the new forest ranger, ain't you?" said Loco Joe, peering closely at Kirk. "Lucky I happened to come here. Padgett's back in this country. I'm a-lookin' for him. Rode to the Cross R Ranch. Couldn't see anything o' Padgett. His cowhands was there, an' when they rode down thisaway, I follered 'em. I figgered mebbe they was on their way to join Padgett somewhere. They come here. I slipped down through the bresh an' overheerd 'em talkin' to Pete Dowling."

"What did they say?" Kirk struck in.

"Dowling said Padgett wasn't here. Seemed sorta su'prised when he learned Padgett hadn't showed up at the ranch yet. He told the Cross R waddies that you beat Aug Mulhall in a gunfight at Rancho. Said he had arrested you an' was holdin' you prisoner in this house. He advised the Cross R men to head back to the ranch an' wait for Padgett to show up there. Said he figgered Padgett would have work for 'em to do afore the night's over."

"So the Cross R hands have been at their home ranch all this time," Kirk muttered. "If Padgett's made any play at the Logan Ranch meantime, he's done it single-handed."

Loco Joe caught his words. "Logan Ranch? I was at the Logan Ranch coupla hours ago. I was a-lookin' for Padgett there. Talked to Siesta Brown an' Missus Logan an' Becky. They said they hadn't seen anything o' Padgett."

Kirk turned to Whitney. "Maybe if we hustle, we'll be in time to stop Padgett's game," he exclaimed in a relieved tone.

Loco Joe had glided to the door. "Adios," he called. "I'm a-ridin' to the Cross R. I figger Padgett'll show up there. I'll be waitin' for him." He rode away.

In a corner of the room, Kirk found his six-shooter, which Dowling had taken from him. He handed Dowling's gun to Whitney.

"You take Dowling's horse," he told Whitney grimly. "We'll ride for the Logan Ranch." They ran outside the house, leaving Pete Dowling stretched on the floor, bound and manacled with his own rawhide and handcuffs.

Kirk led the way, pushing his horse at a stiff gallop through the moonlit hills. They dashed down into Oro Grande Canyon. Rising against the skyline beyond was Cuesta Peak, its usual night blackness half cloaked by an ominous, growing haze which Kirk Howie, in his haste, failed to detect.

With Whitney riding desperately to keep close behind, Kirk headed up the narrow side canyon toward the Four Springs Ranch. Suddenly, rounding a bend, he pulled up, sprang to the ground and pointed ahead.

There, outlined under the stars, sat the commodious stone dwelling of the Logans. A trim, long-barreled horse, its reins grounded, stood near the door.

"That looks like George Padgett's sorrel horse," Kirk clicked under his breath to Whitney. "We didn't get here any too soon."

CHAPTER X

Caught!

MOTIONING Whitney to follow, Kirk crept up to the ranch house. The door was open. A stream of lamplight came out into the yard. Edging along the front wall of the

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house, Kirk paused abruptly. He had heard George Padgett's voice.

"I'm giving you yore choice," Padgett was saying harshly. "I've made my proposition. You can take it or leave it."

"You sneaking coyote, you know I'd do anything for Becky's sake," came the husky answer. It was the Widow Logan's voice.

"Jest remember that, then," Padgett warned. "Don't you try to double-cross me. We'll ride down to Rancho right away. I'll wake up old Max Armijo, the justice of the peace, and get him to take an acknowledgment of the deed you sign for me. I aim to make this a hog-tight land deal without any loopholes for you to slip through afterwards. If you try to tip off my game to anybody at Rancho, or as much as hint that this sale ain't of yore own free will, or try to make out that I'm using coercion—"

The man's voice broke off in a threatening, ugly laugh. "Jest remember yore purty daughter, Mrs. Logan," he said.

Suddenly Kirk Howie sprang into the doorway. His six-shooter covered George Padgett, who was confronting Mrs. Logan in a far corner of the room.

"The game's up, Padgett!" he snapped. "Raise your hands! Raise 'em quick, and no fooling!"

The stocky ranchman whirled. His hands sought the air.

"Howie!" he gasped incredulously. He blinked when he caught sight of Whitney. "Hell!" he muttered.

Kirk stepped forward. He took a gun from Padgett's coat pocket. Then he forced the man to face the wall. "Keep him covered, Whitney," he said, turning as Mrs. Logan caught his arm.

"It's sure good to see that you're safe and sound, Mr. Howie," Mrs. Logan said thankfully. "Becky was scared something had happened to you."

"Where is Becky?"

"She rode over to the ranger station, looking for you."

"And Siesta Brown, isn't he here?"

"When Becky didn't come back, I sent Siesta over towards the station to try to find out what had happened to her," the widow answered. "A few minutes after Siesta left, George Padgett came sneaking around the house and threw a gun in my face." She shuddered. "Kirk, something has happened to Becky! Padgett is behind it all. He knows where Becky is. He said that unless I sold him the ranch immediate, at his own terms—well, he made threats, Kirk," she ended, her voice breaking.

One long step took Kirk to Padgett's side. He grabbed the man's shoulder and whirled him around.

"Padgett, you skunk," he said, his words falling like chips of steel, "where is Becky Logan?"

Padgett said nothing for a moment. His close-set eyes glittered defiance. "She's at my ranch."

"Are you lying to me?"

"No," Padgett snarled. "She's at my ranch, I tell you."

"You stay here," Kirk told Mrs. Logan. "We'll see if he's lying."

He marched Padgett outside and pinioned the man's arms against his sides by means of a catch rope. They rode away, Padgett in the lead. The end of the rope that bound him was tied to Kirk Howie's saddle horn. Kirk rode close behind, and Whitney brought up the rear. They headed north, toward Oro Grande Canyon and the Cross R Ranch.

Suddenly Kirk called a halt.

"Padgett, I believe you're lying!" he said grimly. "According to your cowboys, less than an hour ago, you hadn't been to your ranch all evening. You're leading me on a blind trail. Trying to bait me to your ranch, hoping your men may be able to lend you a helping hand—is that your game? And you don't savvy it may prove dangerous for *you* to show yourself there! Loco Joe Cass is at the Cross R Ranch, watching for you."

"Loco Joe—you say—" Padgett stammered. He licked his lips nervously.

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"He means to kill you. And I reckon you deserve killing, Padgett." Kirk Howie leaned over, his eyes blazing into the ranchman's. "You skunk, I'm warning you! If you don't tell me the truth about Becky Logan, I'm going to raise that rope up around your neck and drag this end over a tree limb!"

Padgett wilted.

"You've got me," he said sullenly. "No, the Logan girl ain't at my ranch. She's up at one of them summer cabins toward Cuesta Peak. She ain't harmed a mite. You've beat my game. Let me go now. I promise I'll quit this country pronto and never come back."

"Turn you loose?" And Kirk laughed dangerously. "No, I've got a job for you. You're going to lead the way, Padgett—to Becky Logan."

They turned their horses and galloped back up the side canyon. As they passed the Logan ranch house, Mrs. Logan ran out, calling for them to stop.

"Padgett was lying when he said Becky was at his ranch," Kirk explained to her swiftly. "But I believe we're on the right trail now."

"I sure hope so," the widow groaned. "Siesta Brown just called me on the phone. He said he hadn't been able to locate Becky. He's over at the ranger station. Bud Lacey just joined him there. Siesta says that Lacey rode over from Sulphur Creek to investigate some smoke he saw coming off Cuesta Peak, and discovered a fire in the timber near the summer cabins."

A swift ejaculation, half smothered, broke from George Padgett. Kirk Howie whirled on him.

"And you said Becky was in one of those summer cabins, Padgett!" the ranger gritted.

Padgett wriggled uneasily in his saddle. Mrs. Logan's story of Bud Lacey's discovery unnerved him. A forest fire! And to Padgett there seemed but one explanation. Evidently his trampling efforts had not entirely quenched the blaze which he had started. A few remaining sparks had been fanned by the strong wind, and had ignited the dry brush and matted pine needle anew.

"I was telling you the truth, Howie," he muttered. "The girl is in one of those cabins."

Whitney broke in, "Good Lord! Do you suppose there's any danger that she will be trapped in the fire, Howie?"

Mrs. Logan reached out and caught Kirk's arm. "Kirk—" she faltered.

"Don't you worry, Mrs. Logan," Kirk said in a dry, unnatural tone. "We'll find Becky in time." And he snapped, "Padgett, you lead the way!"

They spurred their horses and went dashing across the eastern ridge!

Kirk Howie did not feel the assurance his words had implied. A moment later, as he topped the ridge, his fears were intensified by the scene that lay before his eyes. The fire was no trivial blaze. It flared greedily, rising into the sky, sending weird lights and shadows upon the mountainside. The north slope of Cuesta Peak seemed to be alive with angry flame.

CHAPTER XI

The Flaming Forest

WHEN the blaze started, Assistant Ranger Bud Lacy had been at his home station on Sulphur Creek. A shaft of pitch-black smoke, shooting swiftly into the starry heavens above Cuesta Peak, had aroused his suspicions. He attempted to telephone Kirk Howie at the Oro Grande station, but his ring was unanswered.

So Bud rode up the ranger trail, crossed over the Peak and hastened down the wooded slope beyond. As he rode, dead branches began to break under his horse's hoofs with a peculiar crackling sound. A hot, dry wind was sweeping toward him, parching his lips and causing his face to tingle. With the wind came a low ominous roar. Even before he reached the summer cabins, Bud sighted the spreading glow of the fire.

He galloped on past, heading down the trail to the Oro Grande station.

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Fighting this fire would be more than a one-man job. Ranchmen and settlers of the vicinity, trained to aid the rangers in such work, must be called. Over the Oro Grande station telephone, Bud began to send out the fire alarm.

Soon riders were galloping through the night, rushing to take a hand in fighting the flames. The ranger station would be the meeting point. Tools were waiting in convenient caches of the Forest Service. With axes and saws, one crew of men would fell a line of timber in advance of the flames. This timber would be removed. A second crew with mattocks and shovels would dig a trench along the control line, spreading out the dirt along the extreme outer edges of the fires.

The fire fighters were on their way, ready to follow the ranger's bidding in checking the blaze, flanking it, confining it.

But before any of these men arrived, Kirk Howie, with Padgett and Whitney, galloped past the ranger station and turned south toward the heart of the flaming region.

"Take charge of the fire, Bud!" Kirk shouted as he passed. "I'm depending on you for that!"

Bud Lacey and Siesta Brown were standing in the yard of the station. Bud jerked his head vigorously to show he had heard the instructions.

The three riders raced on. The wind had veered. The deafening roar of the fire throbbed in their ears. Even in the thickening pines, the trail showed clearly, illumined by the glowing sky.

At last, Kirk and his companions pulled up their mounts. Ahead, beyond a cleared space, sat the group of summer cabins, seemingly unscathed.

An exclamation of relief broke from Kirk Howie. He saw that the group of buildings had escaped the fire. The direction of the wind had saved them.

"Get down off your horse, Padgett!" Kirk commanded. "Lead the way. Show me—which cabin!"

George Padgett hesitated. At last he muttered, "The girl's not in one of these cabins. There's one farther back, setting up at the head of a cove. That's where I left her."

He pointed southeast, toward a solid red mass of flames.

"Good God!" Kirk cried hoarsely. "That cove is a regular furnace!" He grabbed Padgett by the throat.

"Don't!" the man croaked. "There's a chance. Maybe the girl's still all right. That cabin sets clean at the head of the cove. Maybe the fire ain't reached it yet. We can circle around and come in from the east."

"It's up to you, Padgett!" the ranger gritted. "Show us the way."

Padgett rode to the left, circled the roaring fire, and pushed up a brush-grown ridge. Here the three dismounted, and pressed on afoot. The brush lay in tangles. Padgett stumbled; floundered again to his feet; stumbled again.

"Wait!" Kirk commanded him. He swiftly removed the rope that bound the man's arms. "Now, maybe you can manage better. Keep your feet. Hurry! And don't forget my gun's covering you!"

Padgett hastened on. He topped the ridge at last, and pointed down.

"There—there!" he gasped eagerly. "There's the cabin."

The cabin, a small log structure, stood on a slight eminence just beyond the fire line. It was half hidden by a cloud of black smoke. Long fingers of flame darted greedily toward it, igniting the matted pine needles that lay on the ground.

Suddenly the smoke cloud lifted. The cabin showed plainly now. Its roof was a seething mass of red. Burning brands, carried by the wind, had fallen upon it.

Kirk Howie whirled toward Whitney.

"Whitney," he told the mine owner, "keep Padgett covered with your gun. I'm going to that cabin."

He raced forward. A tongue of flame licked spitefully across his path. He plunged through; felt the scorch-

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ing blasts sear his hands, his cheeks. His garments were ablaze. He paused, slapped at the burning cloth, and then hastened on.

Ahead of him lay the red-crested cabin. Behind, the dense body of fire crowded on, as if pursuing him. It roared ceaselessly. It reached out greedy fingers. It ran high into the tops of mighty trees, its suction drawing forth a pitchy gas that was turned into flame.

Fifty yards from the cabin, Kirk was blinded, half smothered by a thick smoke cloud that swooped upon him. There was no air. For several steps he fought his way on. Then, gasping for breath, he dropped flat and began clawing at the turf.

"I've got to go on!" he thought. "I've got to find Becky."

But he could not go far through that gaseous smoke. It choked him; sapped his strength. His fingers had dug down through the turf. He breathed against the fresh earth, finding oxygen that gave strength and new life.

Suddenly he swayed to his feet. The smoke cloud had lifted. In its wake came the advancing sweep of flame. Kirk ran on toward the burning cabin. A smoke fog met him at the door.

"Becky!" he choked, plunging inside.

He could see nothing. An ominous crackle and hum sounded overhead. The heat was intense.

Again he called the girl's name. And then came an answering voice—incredulous but overjoyed: "Kirk!"

A moment later the ranger was kneeling at Becky Logan's side. She lay with her face pressed to the floor, where there was a current of air. In this way she had managed to escape the smoke.

A sudden burst of red from above warned Kirk. The fire was eating through the roof. He lifted Becky in his arms and stumbled outside. Hastily he freed her from her bonds.

Outlined against the flames, they stood silent for a moment, gazing into each other's eyes.

"Kirk," Becky faltered, "am I dreaming? Are you—are you *real?* Padgett told me you were dead—that Mulhall killed you!"

With an unsteady laugh, Kirk drew her closer, and kissed her. "I'm real, all right, honey. Padgett lied, if he told you that."

They glanced toward the cabin. Mingled with the steady boom of the forest fire had come an abrupt, crashing sound. Smoke now rolled up in a dense cloud above the cabin. The roof had fallen in.

Becky shuddered. "If you hadn't come when you did, Kirk—"

"I was in time," he answered thankfully.

But a glance toward the timber fire warned him that he and the girl were faced by a new danger. The flames had advanced, practically encircling the cabin. The route by which Kirk had entered the cove was now shut off.

"We've got to run for it, Becky," he told the girl hurriedly.

He grasped her arm. Together they went fleeing toward the eastern ridge. Here a dark gap showed—an outlet through the wall of flame.

"We'll make it," Kirk panted to Becky, and she nodded her head in reply. But suddenly he paused. They had reached the gap and found it blocked by smoke, a thick, rolling fog of smoke that poured in a steady wave from the north fire line.

"We've got to go through, Becky!" Kirk muttered desperately.

He took the girl in his arms and plunged forward. He realized that the smoke was probably the forerunner of a tail of flame that would presently whip across the gap and form a solid wall of fire.

Groping into the smoke, Kirk stumbled over a clump of brush. He caught his balance barely in time to escape a fall. Already the smoke had stung his eyes and blinded him. His burden and the rough nature of the ground added to his difficulties. His breath was now coming in painful gasps.

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The smoke fog seemed interminable. Kirk felt all his strength ebbing. He struggled on doggedly.

He must keep going, he thought. But that smoke—he couldn't get his breath. And fire—there was fire everywhere. His eyes, his head, seemed afire. His feet were heavy. He could barely lift them. Another step—and another—he must keep going!

Kirk Howie kept up that torturous routine of fighting for still another step till at last he pitched forward, the girl in his arms, and knew no more.

"Kirk!" Becky's voice was calling. It seemed far off.

His eyes opened, blinking in bewilderment. He gulped in the pure air. There was no longer any smoke to blind and suffocate him; no surrounding wall of fire to menace him and Becky. And Becky's throbbing brown eyes were gazing down into his!

Kirk began to comprehend. He had succeeded in making his blind escape through the smoke, had reached a point of safety without knowing it, and, exhausted, had collapsed.

"We're safe now, I reckon, Kirk!" Becky Logan cried thankfully, and his lips crushed up against hers.

A few minutes later, as they pushed forward through the timber toward the main group of summer cabins, they came upon Whitney, the mine owner. He was wandering around dazedly.

"Oh—Howie!" he mumbled, as Kirk rushed up to him and caught his arm.

"What's the matter, Whitney? Where's Padgett?"

"You made it!" Whitney gulped. "You got out of that damned fire trap. And you saved the girl, too. Good!" His wits were clearing now. "Padgett got away from me," he explained ruefully. "I had my eyes on that burning cabin. I forgot to watch Padgett closely enough. He took me unaware and grabbed my gun. I guess he must have cracked me over the head with it. When I woke up, I saw him running down the slope. He climbed on his horse and headed east. That's the last I saw of him. It's all my own fault," he ended disgustedly. "I should have kept closer watch on him."

Kirk Howie frowned. So Padgett had escaped! Maybe he planned to quit the country at once, hoping to escape punishment for the lawless acts he had committed. Still, Kirk thought, the man was a wolf in human form. Balked in his desperate game, his efforts to escape punishment might take a form other than flight.

"We'll have to watch out for that hombre," Kirk said grimly. "Maybe he's still coyoting around in this timber, waiting to get a pot-shot at us—"

He broke off abruptly. A rider had come dashing into view from the west.

"Kirk! Becky!" he yelled. "Whoopee!" It was Siesta Brown. He was tremendously excited.

"I've got news fer yuh," he panted, running up. "Gosh, sech excitement! An' yuh found Becky, Kirk! Dang it, that's fine! Bud Lacey an' me jest come up thisaway with a bunch o' firefighters. When we got to the summer cabins, we run right smack into a feller who was high-tailin' it from this direction. It was George Padgett. An' mebbe things didn't start to happen vi'lent an' unexpected! Padgett he begins shootin'—"

Siesta paused to recover his breath.

"It was the most pecul'ar thing!" he rushed on. "If yuh'll recolleck, Loco Joe Cass has been a-looking fer Padgett. But, at this moment I speak of, Joe wasn't a-lookin' fer him a-tall. Naw, sir! But Joe he was with our party. He'd come a-ridin' up to the ranger station from Oro Grande Canyon. He'd seen the forest fire, an' he j'ined up with us when he rode this way. He was afeard the fire would reach his shack up on the peak. He was ridin' at the head of our party, a-hurryin' to save his belongin's. An' Padgett seen him afore *he* seen Padgett."

"You say Padgett started shooting—" Kirk broke in.

"Jest that!" was the answer. "Loco

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Joe reels back in the saddle, hit bad. Then he sees Padgett. That ol' squirrel rifle o' his'n goes to his shoulder and starts a-smokin'. That ended it," Siesta finished abruptly. "Padgett's daid, an' Loco Joe's daid. An' if that crazy ol' feller was alive right now, I reckon he wouldn't begrudge the price he had to pay fer settlin' his score with George Padgett."

A cry of horror broke from Becky Logan. Kirk's arm encircled her. He drew her close.

"Yes, that ends it, Becky," he said quietly. "Not that we wanted things to turn out that way. But Padgett was playing for high stakes when he came back to this country. A dangerous game—and he lost."

He glanced toward the flaming timber.

"I've still got work to do," he told the girl. "Go back home, Becky, and wait for me."

CHAPTER XII

Sunrise

THROUGH the remainder of the night, the fire fighters summoned by Bud Lacey fought the forest fire. Kirk Howie personally took charge. A control line was established, and was gradually extended in the shape of a horseshoe, so that the fire was surrounded on three sides.

Thus the fire was brought under control.

Tired men were now relieved by newcomers who would watch to see that the blaze did not break out afresh.

Satisfied that the danger was past, Kirk Howie relinquished command to Bud Lacey. As he went to his horse, he found Becky waiting for him.

"Surely you haven't been here all night!" he ejaculated incredulously.

"Most of it," Becky admitted. "But I slipped down to the ranch a while ago and rustled up a breakfast. It's waiting, Kirk—breakfast for two—for you and me."

She slipped her arm through his. Leading their horses, they walked together down the trail to the ranger station.

"You're tired, Kirk! And no wonder."

A smile crossed the ranger's smoke-grimed face. He was tired, but he was content in his moment of victory, finding in Becky Logan's companionship a supreme reward.

"Becky, it's all over."

She nodded eagerly. "And we've won out! The Logan Ranch is safe now, and so is this forest. Mr. Whitney is down at the ranch now, offering mother a gosh-awful big sum for the water-right on only three of our springs. He says that the Cross R cowhands must have found Pete Dowling at that old house where you left him. Dowling and the Cross R men were seen riding out of the country a couple of hours ago. They had warbags tied behind their saddles, like they mean to leave for good. The last of the Cross R gang, Kirk—and now they're gone."

The sun's yellow flame was beginning to burst over the eastern horizon.

"Look, Kirk!" Becky pointed to the ranger station.

From a pole in the station yard, a large American flag was fluttering in the breeze.

"Siesta Brown wanted to celebrate," Becky laughed softly. "So he put up the station flag. He said he wanted the world to know that Uncle Sam is boss of the forest, and that this is a free country again." Her brown eyes shone up proudly into the man's. "Since you're the one who brought about all these things, it looks as if the flag is raised in your honor, Mr. Ranger!"

"Gosh! I don't want any honor out of this," Kirk protested. Then he reconsidered. "Yes, I do, too," he announced. "I want you to marry me, Becky. And you'll honor me a heap by saying that you will. Will you say it, Becky?"

Her lips met his. That was his answer. They smiled together into the sunrise.

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Beauty, Beef and Bucky

By Stephen Payne

The West—big, open-hearted and vital—will call to the soul of man and woman alike and bring them together to fulfill a glorious destiny.

"BUCKY" MILLER was on his way from the Pothook outfit's range camp to a pasture located at the north edge of Badger Hole Flats, when he observed signs of life at an abandoned cabin a mile or so distant to the south. He could see a covered wagon near the dilapidated old shanty and two horses were either picketed or hobbled near by.

"Squatters," said the young range rider disdainfully. "Hum, Ike Sawter run off the last bunch of nesters what holed up in that shack. I suspect he'll get right up on his war hoss when he learns that some other triflin' outfit has moved in."

Curiosity prompting him, Bucky rode to the cabin to "have a squint at the squatters." Of a certainty they must be intending to stay, for new window sashes with shining panes now filled what had formerly been bleak openings; and behind those windows were flowered curtains through which Bucky could not see the inside of the cabin. Had he been able to do so, this genial, happy-go-lucky young range rider for the Pothook outfit would not have spoken as he did a minute later. For upon riding around the southwest corner of the cabin, and thus entering a small yard between it and a tumble-down shed, Bucky saw a pale young man who was ineffectually attempting to hang a screen door to the outer edge of a door frame which was already fitted with a new pine door.

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"How do you do?" said this incompetent man. "Could you give me a hand? This screen—"

"*Me* lend a squatter a hand?" Bucky's tone was scornful. "Feller, I'm a cowpuncher, and cowpunchers sure ain't got no use for—"

He broke off so abruptly as almost to swallow his words. His lower jaw dropped and his eyes opened in a wide stare. For the new pine door had opened even as he spoke and a girl stood there, framed in it. A slim girl in a pink dress; a hatless girl with a great deal of wavy brown hair which the afternoon sun was turning to the hue of burnished copper; a girl with the prettiest and sweetest face, although it was now deeply flushed, that Bucky had ever seen.

He stammered "How do?" and instinctively reached for his hat. He felt like a cad and a fool, and he would have given his outfit, including even Skip, the steel-gray pony he was riding, to have recalled his scornful words.

The girl surveyed the puncher from blue eyes that were cold and challenging. "'Me lend a squatter a hand?'" she quoted bitingly. Evidently she had plenty of spunk. "I suppose you're one of Ike Sawter's heroic cowboys," she continued witheringly. "The nasty old rascal — I mean Ike Sawter — was here in person this morning, and he expressed the same sentiments which I just heard you express, only he did it much more forcibly. In fact, he told us to clear out, asserting that this was his range and that he had no use for squatters." Her emphasis on the last word showed plainly that she hated the very sound of it.

"Ma'am, I didn't go to—I didn't mean—" Bucky stammered, wondering how he could square himself, and keenly aware that his face and neck must be the color of raw meat.

"Don't apologize," returned the girl cuttingly. "Don't humble yourself. In fact, the sooner you go and the less you say the better."

"Say, Sis—say, Nancy," expostulated the pale young man. "There's no need of— You're flying off the handle. You should let me fight our—"

"You're too sick to fight, Welby," returned the girl. "And until you are well and strong I'll talk right up to these unreasonable cowmen. Fellow," she looked straight at the unhappy Bucky, "since you're still here, I'll tell you as I told Sawter, your boss, that we have homesteaded this land and here we intend to stay."

"I sure hope you do," cried Bucky, finding his tongue, "Yes, sir—I mean, ma'am, I'm for yuh."

The young woman's hostile expression changed not in the slightest. "I'm not forgetting what you said to my brother," she replied.

Two youngsters in blue overalls, one quite evidently a girl, the other a boy, had appeared from within the cabin and around the older girl's skirt were gazing wide-eyed at the cowboy and his horse.

"Nice horse," said the boy.

"Nice mans," said the little girl.

Bucky mustered a smile. "Twins, ain't you?" he ventured.

"Uh-huh," came the immediate response from the boy. "I'm Timmie and Sis is Toots. We're a lot younger'n Sister Nancy and Big Brother Welby. Nancy, why you scoldin—"

"Young man, under the circumstances I think you had better go," said the pale young man, who had now become known to Bucky as "Welby." We wanted to be friendly with everyone in this country, which is altogether new to us, but Mr. Sawter's attitude this morning showed us that it is impossible. If you are one of his cowboys I might remind you that you are on Welby Jameson's property."

Bucky sat his horse motionless. Welby had been exceedingly polite. Bucky Miller too would be polite. "I'm swallerin' every mean thing I said a little bit ago," he announced. "And now I wish you'd let me help hang that screen door."

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The small girl brushed past her elder sister to come outside and gaze up at the puncher expectantly. "Let me see you swallow mean things," she said.

Bucky laughed, but his laugh died, for Nancy caught up the tot and said coldly, "Your apology is not accepted, and we do not care for any assistance from any of Ike Sawter's men."

Bucky certainly swallowed hard then. Without another word he turned his steel-gray pony and spurred it savagely. The pony, astonished by such unusual treatment, leaped forward to speed away at a gallop. Bucky was mad—mad all over. Weren't women the perverse, contrary things? He'd never go back to that cabin! Never try again to square things! Ike Sawter could run out this Jameson outfit. Bucky hoped Ike would do it, and Ike would.

He was ornery enough to do 'most anything, was old Ike Sawter, a cantankerous old bachelor who lived south of Badger Hole Flats on Grouse Creek. He claimed Badger Hole Flats for his cow range, but made use as well of any other range which he could hog. Tom Weston, who owned the Pothook outfit and was Bucky's boss, did not particularly like Sawter. But cowmen would stick together when it came to ridding the range of a nester or squatter.

"'Squatter!'" exclaimed Bucky aloud and laughed mirthlessly. "In all my life did I ever get in so all-fired bad? Nope. Huh! What do I care? But say, that girl, Nancy—she's got lots of fire; spunky as a thoroughbred hoss."

Bucky had forgotten all about his intention of riding to the pasture north of Badger Hole Flats, where he was supposed to look after a small herd of registered Herefords, and presently he found himself back at his range camp, which was seven miles east of these flats. He did not sleep well that night. Something had taken hold of him—the vision of a girl, slim and beautiful, with a wealth of hair that was burnished copper in the sunlight.

"I don't ever want to see her again," he told himself when he rose in the morning. "Gosh, no! Not after the tongue-lashin' she gave me. I won't try to square things, not a-tall."

Nevertheless, noon of this day found Bucky reining up Skip between the shed and the lonely cabin on Badger Hole Flats. The twins, Toots and Timmie, were playing in the yard. They evidently did not share in their elder sister's unfavorable opinion of the cowboy, for they welcomed him warmly.

"Where are the others?" Bucky inquired, dreading somewhat to meet Nancy and yet fearful that he might not see her. No use kidding himself. He wanted to see her the worst way.

"Took wagon," Timmie informed, "and went yonder to that bunch of trees to get fence posts."

"Left you youngsters alone, eh?"

"It's only half a mile, Welby said. He can't chop much, but Sis is gettin' good with an ax."

Bucky untied a bundle from behind his saddle. "Trout—for you," he said. "Put 'em inside where it's cool."

"Thank you," said both the twins gravely. "You want to play with us a while?"

"What do you play?"

"Oh, I dunno. If we just had a little wagon we could have oodles of fun."

"Gee, couldn't you!" Bucky exclaimed as an idea which was almost an inspiration struck him. He was getting along with the twins all hunky-dory. He'd make them a wagon and then maybe Miss Nancy would—

The puncher abruptly decided he would not wait at the Jameson cabin for the return of the girl and her brother. Nancy might return the trout to him, refusing to accept them, and he did not want that to happen. Bucky rode straight back to his camp, where he at once set to work upon the construction of a small wagon. He was neither a good carpenter nor a good blacksmith and found he had no small job on hand. Darkness found him still hard at work, and he was up and at the task at daylight in the morning.

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"Guess that's a pretty dad-johned swelligant job for me," said the puncher at last, pushing back his hat from his perspiring brow and surveying his handiwork with approval. "Now to deliver the do-jiggie."

A large gunnysack held the wagon nicely, and Skip was a gentle pony upon whose back almost anything could be carried. Bucky arrived at the cabin on the flats at 10 A. M. As on the previous day the twins were there, alone, for Welby and Nancy were out after more fence posts. Bucky presented the wagon, which was seized upon with gusto and great approval. For an hour the young cowboy played with the two tots, until he saw the team and wagon load of posts coming and decided to depart. Two gifts to the twins should certainly do something towards decreasing pretty Nancy's hostility. On his next call Bucky would face her boldly.

Bucky swung onto Skip, and, with the thanks of Toots and Timmie in his ears, rode away northward, but a dense quaking-aspen grove at the east of the little home attracted his eye. He could disappear over a low hill at the north, then unobserved slip back into this grove for the purpose of seeing how his latest gift was received by Nancy and Welby.

Ten minutes later the cowboy was in the aspen grove, only fifty feet distant from the cabin but out of sight. He saw the team with the pitifully small load of fence posts arrive; saw the twins greet their elder brother and sister joyously and proudly exhibit their prize.

"The nice cowboy gave us this jim-dandy wagon," declared Toots.

"The same young fellow who was here the other day, and who brought the fish yesterday?" demanded Welby.

"Uh-huh," announced Timmie. "And he played with us, and he said he lived off seven miles that way," pointing east, "and he told me if we ever got in trouble and needed help to come for him."

"Um," murmured Welby. "He seems to be— Well, I scarcely know what to make of him. Do you, Nancy?"

The girl shook her head. Bucky observed with open adoration that head and the figure below it. For a moment so rapt was he that the thud-thud of hoofs sounding out of the south failed to distract his attention. Then he noted an expression very near to fear come into Welby's pale face; noted Nancy's eyes harden, her face set defiantly. A burly and bearded rider had reined up a large black horse in the yard and was glaring at the girl and her brother. Instinctively the twins abandoned their new wagon and ran to their sister for protection, Timmie crying out, "It's Mr. Sawter, the bad mans."

"'Bad mans,' huh?" Ike Sawter rasped belligerently. "S'pect one of you must a-told them brats that or they wouldn't be repeatin' it. Wal, I'm bad all right when I get riled, and I'm gettin' riled 'bout you yahoos squattin' here. See yuh're gettin' some posts. Aimin' to fence in some of my range, are yuh?"

"Aiming to fence *our* land," returned Nancy with spirit. "I'd just like to ask you what you mean by letting one of your cowboys bring us some trout; by letting him make the twins a wagon; and then coming around here yourself acting like—like I don't know what!"

"Huh?" Sawter stared at the girl. "One o' my cowboys brung yuh darned nesters— Ho, I see what's what. Don't take Ike Sawter long to catch on. Uh-huh, I seen a steel-gray hoss moseyin' across these flats with a rider on 'im. Yest'day I seen 'im. Wal, I'll fix that jasper for tryin' to make up with squatters. I'll fix him proper."

"Oh, you will!" cried the girl. "He's one of your men, isn't he?".

"Huh? Ye-ah, oh, ye-ah, he's one of my men," growled Sawter with a peculiar grin.

Bucky, of course, knew the man was lying, and he was furious; but evidently the Jamesons believed Sawter, who continued, "And he's a dang double-

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crosser. Glad I found out what he was up to. Wal, I warned yuh squatters day afore yest'day to pull yore freight. Yuh ain't done it yet. I'm tellin' yuh again tuh git. This'll be my last warnin'. 'Nuff said."

The rancher wheeled his horse. The new toy wagon was not directly in the path of his horse, but Sawter saw it and with a mirthless laugh forced his mount straight at the little wagon. Toots and Timmie both cried out in alarm. Sawter's horse attempted to leap the object in its path, but with a savage oath Sawter yanked its mouth, forcing it to wheel about in a circle and thus smash the wagon with its hoofs.

"You beast!" cried Nancy.

A malicious chuckle answered her, and Sawter sped away; leaving two small children in tears, their older sister trying to comfort them and Welby shaking his fist after the rancher in impotent fury. Welby was not the only man present who was furious. Bucky Miller, however, did not care to disclose his presence, because he would then be accused of eavesdropping, about which he had not felt right any of the time he had been so doing. Now, keeping out of sight of the Jamesons, he rode out of the grove toward the north, passed over the brow of a low hill, circled back down a valley and overtook Sawter a mile from that individual's ranch and thus far away from the lonely cabin.

"Hey, what's eatin' yuh?" demanded the rancher, yanking his horse onto its haunches as Bucky pounded up. "From the looks of yore mug yuh're on the prod."

"Pile off, you damned cur!" snapped Bucky. "I'll pound the liver outa you."

"Huh? Yuh're talkin' locoed. What for are yuh after my hide?"

"For smashin' a wagon belongin' to a couple of little kids, and you know what else. Sawter, if I lick you, you're to let the Jameson family strictly alone. Do yuh savvy?"

"Ho! Ho! I already got wise as yuh was snoopin' round that bunch o' riff-raff. Yuh're one hell of a cowboy, Bucky Miller—a-takin' up with squatters! Good gosh, I'll let ol' Tom Weston know what kind of a cow crammer he's got, an' yuh'll get yore time pronto."

"I said," grated Bucky hoarsely, "you were to lay offen that family. I aim to teach you to do it right now. Pile off!"

"That ain't what yuh said fust," bellowed Sawter. "Yuh said if yuh licked me I was to let the Jameson family alone. I'll take yuh up on that. Yep. If yuh wallop me I'll lay offen 'em, but— get this—if I wipe up the ground with you, why, I'll ride that outfit till they pull their freight, and I'll run *yuh* out, too."

"Fair enough, if you'll stay by your word." Bucky leaped off his horse, and unbuckling his belt, tossed it and the holstered Colt aside. "Come on."

Ike Sawter came. There were no witnesses to the fight other than the patient horses, and they saw such a scrap as they had never before witnessed. Sawter was the heavier man and the more powerful, yet what Bucky lacked in size and strength he made up in superior agility. Neither man asked for quarter nor gave it. Rough and tumble, hammer and tongs, they went after each other like range stallions.

Twice Sawter got Bucky down, but each time the lithe puncher squirmed free. Once he knocked the rancher flat and gallantly waited for him to rise. Bucky's face was battered almost beyond recognition. Sawter suffered less in this respect, yet the puncher's blows to the heavy man's stomach and over his heart told heavily. The breath sobbed in the lungs of both. They tottered weakly, neither flinching, until at last Bucky landed a right swing over Sawter's heart which laid him flat, knocked out.

Breathing in gasps, gory, and wobbly on his legs, Bucky went to a small stream nearby and brought back a hat-

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ful of water which he doused over Sawter's face. The man revived, sitting up groggily.

"Remember what you agreed to do?" asked Bucky.

"Uh-huh," muttered Sawter uncertainly.

Bucky left him there on the ground among the sage brush, and rode silently back to his own headquarters. The puncher knew he had been in a real fight, which might easily have terminated differently. He also knew he had backed a bunch of nesters against a cowman, a thing which no cowboy should do. He was therefore on the wrong side of the fence.

Tom Weston would of course hear of it and doubtless Tom would fire his range rider. Bucky had no money; did not know what he would do when he was fired. Of a certainty no other cowman in this country would give him a job. What! Hire a puncher that had stood up for nesters and had fought a cattleman who was trying to run out one such set of despised land seekers! Yet Bucky wanted more than anything to stay in this country—now.

It was a sad cowboy who prepared a lonely meal that evening and washed the bruises on his face. His right eye was swollen shut, was as black around its edges as a negro's. One great satisfaction, however, the young puncher had. He had licked the bullying Ike Sawter, and the Jamesons would now be safe from the fellow. Nancy would hear about it, and then perhaps she would smile at Bucky. That was what mattered. The loss of his job, his disgrace as a cowboy, did not matter so greatly when weighed against Nancy's favor. Bucky went to sleep with a smile on his bruised lips.

At eight o'clock of the next morning he was shoeing Skip when to the camp came galloping a hatless little figure on a bony workhorse. It was little Timmie on one of Welby's work team, the child clinging to the animal's back only by holding to the saddle horn.

"O Bucky!" he burst out at once. "I'm glad I found you. Sis didn't want me to come. But I slipped away from her, and I got the saddle on old Dan by gettin' up on a box, and I come anyhow. 'Cause you said to come if we was in trouble, and we are in trouble."

"Not so fast," Bucky interrupted the boy. "Now, take it easy. Just what is the trouble?"

"It's Mr. Sawter. He come and pounded on the door and Welby got out of bed. There was a quarter of beef under our shed, what Mr. Sawter said we had stolen. And then he right away went on to get a lot of cowmen to come. When he was gone Welby and Nance was all up in the air, 'cause, sure enough, there was a quarter of beef under the shed. Welby hadn't bought it nor put it there at all, and he was upset terrible—not knowin' what to do. But I knew what to do and I come to get you."

Bucky lost little time in saddling Skip and riding with Timmie back to the cabin on Badger Hole Flats. When he arrived, half a dozen grim-eyed cowmen were present, Sawter and Tom Weston among them. These men were grouped in a half circle in front of the cabin, where stood Welby and Nancy. Through the open door of the cabin Toots was visible. Evidently the cowmen had just arrived and called the Jamesons outside. There was a moment's silence in which Tom Weston glanced sharply at Bucky.

"How come *you* here?" the rancher demanded. "And what has happened to your face? Great guns, you've got the blackest eye ever I saw."

"I'll answer for that doggoned yahoo, meanin' Bucky," shouted Ike Sawter. "Tom," looking straight at Weston, "yore puncher has been a-takin' up with this trash yere," he waved his hand at Welby and Nancy. "Ye-ah, Bucky Miller clumb my frame yest'day simply 'cause I told these yere squatters they had to drift. I mean, he tried for to climb my frame. Yuh can all see who got the best o' the argyment.

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Gosh, but ain't Bucky a terrible-lookin' sight?"

"He is," said Weston shortly, frowning at his range rider. "I'll ask you for particulars later, Bucky. Right now there is something much more serious to consider. Sawter says there is a quarter of beef in that dinky little shed. Two of you boys carry it out here, will you?"

Two of the grim-eyed ranchers swung off to comply with this order. They cast wondering eyes upon Bucky as they passed him and one said in a low tone, "Did Sawter really pound hell outa yuh, Bucky?"

The puncher made no reply. He gazed at Nancy and saw her blue eyes upon him with an expression of rather baffled wonderment in their depths. Doubtless she had many things to puzzle about this bright morning. For one, Sawter had said yesterday that Bucky was one of his men. Now the bullying rancher had just refuted that statement. No one said anything at all until the two men returned with a large quarter of beef, which they deposited on the ground in front of the half circle of riders. In Bucky's ear little Timmie whispered fiercely, "Welby don't know nuffin' about that beef, as I has already told you. It's funny."

"Queer, you mean," growled Bucky in a whisper and to himself. "Sawter found that beef early this mornin'. I'll bet he's gone back on his agreement with me. Uh-huh, there's a nigger in the sticks, but my knowin' it won't help a dad-johned bit unless I get the goods on that nigger."

"Let's get to the business on hand," said Weston, taking charge of the meeting, simply because he was the prominent cattleman present. He gazed sternly at the thunderstruck Welby, who was plainly bewildered and helpless since he knew not what to do in this crisis. Bucky's heart was torn with pity for him. What a frail little fellow he was! How greatly he needed the invigorating and pure air of this mountain climate to restore his shattered health. A year of it and he would be another man. How plucky Nancy was! She also was both bewildered and perplexed, yet she held her head high and there was fire in her eyes.

"You two there by the shanty," Tom Weston continued sternly, "what have you got to say for yourselves? Ike Sawter has brought us here to act as a jury, as you might say. How do you explain the presence of this quarter of beef, Jameson? I've been told that is your name."

"I don't explain it," said Welby evenly. "It was not in the shed when we went to bed last night and it was there this morning. That is all I know about it."

"Ho! It is, hey?" bawled Sawter. "Gosh, feller, I should think you could think of a better lie'n that."

"*I'm* askin' the questions, Ike," Weston said pointedly.

"I'm not lying," said Welby, red spots glowing suddenly in his pale cheeks. "You men will all have to believe me when I repeat we know nothing about this beef."

"That right, girl?" Weston looked at Nancy.

"We had nothing to do with putting it under the shed," she replied, "and we do not understand how it came there."

"Men, these two make a flat denial of any knowledge of this quarter of beef," said Weston.

"Which is prezactly what might be expected," spoke up one of the ranchers.

"What's your testimony, Sawter?" inquired Weston.

"I got up early this mornin'," Ike began, "and I rode by this dump yere, on my way to gather a bunch of hosses what range further on to the north. While ridin' past this shed I seen a-hangin' under it this quarter o' beef. Wal, knowin' squatters like I do, and knowin' how they always live offen honest cowmen, I thinks I better 'vestigate a little."

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To himself Bucky Miller whispered privately, "The ornery cuss has got his speech down pat; has larnt it by heart. Rolls off his tongue like water off a duck's back."

"Gentlemen," Sawter continued, "I found some tracks of a man on foot; these tracks leadin' out to a little gully west of here and back again. Them tracks was made by a feller wearin' flat-heeled shoes—shoes what I would say was 'bout the same size as Welby's." He paused a moment, while everyone present looked at young Jameson's feet. Nearly all cowmen wear high-heeled boots. Welby's feet, however, were encased in flat-heeled shoes.

"Welby," shouted Bucky Miller unexpectedly, "what do you do with your shoes at night?"

Sawter glared at the puncher. "Button your lips!" he bellowed.

"Why I leave my shoes out here on the doorstep every night," Welby made answer to Bucky. "Don't know why I do it. Just a habit, I guess."

"And you left 'em out last night as usual?" came Bucky's question.

The pale little man nodded. "Point one for the defense," shouted Bucky. "Go on with your story, Sawter. Careful what you say, for I don't mind warnin' you I'm out to nail your hide on the fence."

An oath came to Sawter's lips, to be smothered there as Weston frowned at him, saying quickly, "Lady present."

"And a dang meddlin' cowpoke what ain't needed is present, too," snorted Sawter. "Tom Weston, why don't yuh send that da— that lunker 'bout his work 'stead o' lettin' him stick round yere and badger me?"

"Go on with your testimony," snapped the grizzled owner of the Pothook outfit.

"All right, all right!" rasped Sawter. "Wal, the ground out in that little gully is mighty rocky and I couldn't find no tracks there, exceptin' only them of the man in shoes. But—men, there was a dead two-year-old steer a-lyin there, butchered and bled all proper. It was partly skinned out and this hind quarter was cut off the carcass. The rest of that carcass is there yet. My brand is on that butchered steer's hide. Yuh can all go and see for yourselves."

Welby gasped. Nancy turned pale for the first time. With one accord the ranchers, including Tom Weston and Sawter, rode to look at the carcass; and at the man tracks, which led from the cabin to that carcass, thence back again to the little shed south of the cabin. Bucky, too, looked the situation over and whistled softly to himself. When the men had finished all returned to their former positions. One of them announced, "It's all jus' as Sawter said 'twas. Ain't no doubt a-tall of who kilt his steer and packed that quarter in here."

"I don't think so either," Bucky sang out cheerfully. "Pull off one of your shoes, Welby, so these boys can make sure it fits them tracks."

The homesteader stared at him. "I had been almost sure you were our friend," he said reproachfully. "I was mistaken. We have no friends." Nevertheless, he removed one of his shoes, which was speedily found to fit the tracks exactly. There were even a few drops of dried blood on it.

"Looks very bad for you, sir," said Weston with a dubious shake of his head. "I had sort of hoped it would turn out otherwise."

"Hoped we would stick him, yuh mean?" boomed Sawter. "Wal, we've done it! Done it proper. Even that no-count jackanapes of a cowpuncher of yourn, Weston—by that I'm referrin' to Bucky Miller, the squatter's friend—has announced there ain't no doubt as to who kilt my steer and packed that quarter o' beef in yere."

"Now I ain't minded to prosecute," Sawter continued, in a tone denoting that he considered himself most magnanimous. "All I want is to rid the range o' such riff-raff as this yere tribe."

"Sportin' of you," drawled Bucky.

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"They're scarcely an asset to any community, are they, Sawter?"

Nancy's eyes were riveted on the young puncher. These eyes were stormy and yet there was in them a baffled expression as if the girl couldn't understand how Bucky could bring the friendless homesteaders a mess of trout and make for the twins a wagon; express friendship in other ways, such as engaging in a fist fight with Ike Sawter; and then abruptly right-about-face and to all appearances be won over to Sawter's side.

"I'll say they ain't," Sawter rumbled. "Why, they ain't worth two whoops for nothin'. Bet they can't even plow like nesters is s'posed to, to say nothin' of bein' able to handle cattle. We'll be well rid of 'em, I tell yuh."

Bucky nodded emphatically. "You said it, Sawter," he shouted. "This Welby feller now—I figger he's a plumb counterfeit, don't you? Bet he can't ride nor rope nor brand."

Weston was plainly puzzled, opening his lips as though to remonstrate with Bucky and then closing them without saying anything.

"Say," exclaimed Sawter, "Bucky yuh're a-showin' sense since yuh got yore eyes opened by them tracks and all. Huh! I reckon yuh've took a tumble to yourself an' are a-tryin' to kinda square yourself with yore boss and with me. Welby a counterfeit? Yuh said it, cowboy. Him? That jasper ride or rope or brand? Good gosh, it's a joke, men."

"Damned ironic joke, too," drawled Bucky, while the other cowmen all stared at him. "Men," he suddenly boomed, the lazy drawl all gone from his voice, "this case ain't closed yet. I'm aimin' to bring out a few points yuh seem to 'a' overlooked."

Without giving anyone a chance to interrupt him Bucky continued: "We all agreed that the steer out yonder was not killed by a rifle or a six-shooter shot. The man that killed it roped it, threw it and cut its throat. Could Welby Jameson have done that? Sawter has just admitted he could *not* have done it."

For a moment Bucky paused to enjoy the sudden hunted expression which had come to Sawter's face.

"That's the truth, Bucky," shouted one of the ranchers. "Why, Welby can't ride or rope good enough to—Say, you just trapped Sawter into makin' a statement to the effect that Welby couldn't do a cowboy's work. Hop to it, Bucky."

"I aim to," returned Bucky. "The ground where the steer carcass lies is rocky. No tracks there except those left by Welby's shoes—the shoes which were left on his doorstep last night. Men, if we ride around that steer carcass in a wide circle we're bound to find the tracks of the cowman that did kill that steer.

"The same man who did that took off his boots, walked in sock feet to this cabin, where he put on Welby's shoes. Back to the carcass he walked and packed in this quarter of beef. He was careful to leave plenty of tracks. Too damned careful. That man was not Welby Jameson and I'll prove it."

"Hey, what the blue blazes yuh tryin' to get at?" bellowed Sawter, finding his tongue at last. "You'll prove Jameson didn't pack that beef in yere an' hang it under his shed? Yuh will, like hell! It's cinched onto him a'ready. Weston, I'm gettin'—"

"Be quiet!" roared old Tom. "Bucky, prove your point—if you can."

"Welby Jameson," Bucky's voice snapped like a whiplash, but his eyes were on Ike Sawter, watching that individual with catlike intensity, "step out here, pick up that hunk of beef and pack it under that shed."

Jameson stepped forward in the midst of a tense silence. Ike Sawter's Adam's apple jerked up and down. His face was wolfish. Welby Jameson tugged at the quarter of beef lying on the ground. He got hold of the leg and lifted with all his strength. Blood suffused his face. The heavy piece of raw beef did not come off the ground.

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"Thunder!" cried a rancher. "That fella will have a hemorrhage. He can't lift that beef. I'll help yuh."

"Stay on your horse, Bill!" Bucky roared. "Welby, pick up that meat. Yuh packed it in from that carcass, full three hundred yards. Ike Sawter says yuh did."

"But I can't lift it!" cried Jameson. "I can't get it off the ground!"

"I see you can't!" Tom Weston exclaimed. "Let it be. Men, do I need to explain the significance of this? I see I don't! All four of you get out to that carcass and start looking for the real butcher's tracks. It was a strong man that carried this beef in here."

"And his name was Ike Sawter!" shouted Bucky.

Sounded then a lurid oath from Sawter's lips, followed instantly by the savage bark of a Colt. Sawter had drawn his gun and raised it to fire at Bucky. But the puncher's six-shooter spoke first and his aim was true. Sawter's weapon, struck by Bucky's bullet, spun from his hand, while the man cried out with the pain in his suddenly shocked fingers.

"No need of lookin' for tracks now," called Tom Weston. "Sawter, you're convicted of tryin' to put over on these homesteaders the meanest, nastiest frame-up I ever heard of. Yes, and it was the cleverness of a cowpuncher that defeated you. Good work, Bucky! Good work! I'm doggoned proud that you're a Pothook cowboy."

Bucky threw his boss a grateful look; then glanced at Nancy. Her eyes were shining and now there was something in them very pleasant for the puncher to see—warmth and gratitude, and even something more.

Sawter started to curse. "Shut up!" commanded Bucky. "What are we going to do with this ornery hound, Mr. Weston?" he inquired.

"Find somebody to buy his ranch and stock and give him twenty-four hours to leave the country," returned Weston instantly. He let his eyes rest on Nancy and Welby, and the twins, who were now close to their brother and sister. "I think you folks will be a real credit to this neighborhood," he said. "And I'm going to do all I can to help you make a go of it. Well, come along, men, and you, too, Sawter. Since Bucky disarmed yuh so doggoned neatly I reckon you won't give us any trouble. We got some business to straighten up. You comin' with us, Bucky?"

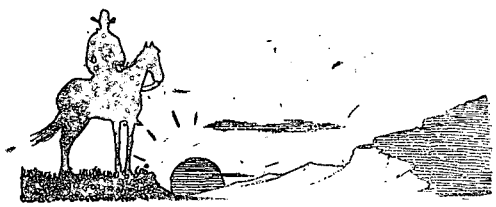
"Uh? No, if you don't mind I'll stick round here for a little bit," said Bucky. "You see, I got to explain a few things to Miss Nancy, and I got to repair a broken wagon for the kids."

"No, I don't mind," Weston smiled, and he rode away after the other ranchers, who were escorting Ike Sawter.

Bucky gazed into Nancy's bright eyes. "And do *you* mind if I stay?" he asked.

"I would mind if you didn't," she returned with a smile. "Which," she went on, "is a rather peculiar way of putting it, but you know what I mean."

Bucky knew all right what she meant, if the way he grabbed Nancy and kissed her was any proof. And when her lips met his, Bucky knew that he found all that his heart desired.



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Sawdust and Sage

By Edith K. Norris

Cupid certainly uses queer agents—once in a blue moon, even a mountain lion may throw a man in the way of discovering his heart's desire.

WORD of a prowling mountain cat came in to Mr. Kale Perry's place, where Rufe Larkin worked as top-hand. A couple of riders had glimpsed him on the low, wooded ridge that marked the northern boundary of the ranch.

"It's crack horses we're aiming to raise here," mused Rufe. "It ain't likely that a side line of hungry cat stock will mix in without trouble."

So midnight found the cowboy's tall frame folded into an ambush of brush, upon the low ridge, with a pistol and knife at his belt, and a rifle to hand. Quite ready—except for what happened.

For the hours wore wearily toward dawn, while the inconsiderate mountain lion appeared to be keeping some other appointment. And Rufe, cramped and fuming, grew impatient of watching the drowsing groups of horseflesh on the rolling plains below.

Failing was doubly galling, because admirers in the bunkhouse, on the strength of his sharpshooting skill, had bet very heavily on his chance of success. Tough, having to let them down, after that pretty show of confidence!

But it was just as he was giving up in disgust, that Rufe's keen eyes made out the cautiously moving rider, now threading in and out, between the scattered groups below.

"Too snoopy, for right intentions!" he concluded. And then, within him, little bubbles of excitement exploded into the delightful conviction that some of the county's late horse-stealing mysteries were about to be solved.

"With a little luck," Rufe told himself, "I won't have to face those bunkhouse jokers empty-handed, *after* all!

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A rustler in hand might make up for a lion in the bush!"

Those same prickly bushes, and those long hours of waiting, had certainly put an edge on his appetite for battle. So Rufe Larkin's big muscles tensed, as he bided his time.

With what seemed an uncanny instinct for the best values, the stranger was singling out two splendid blacks that had come into Kale Perry's possession, only a few weeks before. Bought at auction, when a big tent show went broke, and disbanded in a southern Utah town.

Lithely, the intruder now rode one huge horse, while the second followed, as though closely roped. And Rufe Larkin noted with satisfaction that the direction they had taken would bring them within easy range of his hiding place, on the ridge.

As a matter of fact, he had hardly squirmed to the edge, before the trio was just below; and he gave a quick leap that stopped the first horse, while he pulled its much startled rider to the ground.

Then Rufe braced himself for the vicious struggle he had expected. But there was only a shivery heaving, in the figure his powerful hands pinned.

Disgruntled by so easy a victory, Rufe gave a quick snort of contempt.

"Some heluva horse thief! Youngster, better leave throwin' the long rope to a chap with *backbone*—"

"I wasn't stealing! I was— Oh, please! You hurt—"

The sound of that low, frightened voice, sent Rufe back with a jerk, against his heels, so that the fading moonlight might play on the face of his captive. Then it was his turn to gasp, for ill-fitting masculine garments were swathing the daintiest of girls!

"You see,"—her voice was still shaken—"Jim and Barry are my good pals. We did circus work together, till our show went broke—"

Still on his knees, Rufe bent forward to study her sweetly rounded face. Then he jumped up.

"Gosh sake! If you're not that cute little bareback rider, Princess Florette!"

The girl scrambled to her feet.

"I'm just plain Flora Jones, now—Out of work."

"*Plain* is not the right word. But I saw your last show. Went up to the auction, with Mr. Kale Perry. That daredevil act of yours gave me such a kick, I ought to have recognized you, even in that baggy coat, and those rolled-up pants!"

"They're my brother's. He was ringmaster—and we're both stranded here, till we can see how a new business venture of his is going to turn out."

Rufe was to remember this reference to a "business venture" later.

"We're stopping up at the lake—Paulin's hotel," the girl went on, "and when I heard my pets had been brought to a place that was so close, I got so lonesome for them, I just couldn't stand it! So I hired a pony from Paulin's son, that big, lean fellow they call 'Ferret'—"

"Because his long nose is always ferreting into other folks doings—I know him!"

"But this ranch is so big, I was an endless time locating my poor homesick chums—"

"And you never figured on a big lummox dropping on you, as soon as you found them." Rufe submitted, contritely.

The girl laughed, and pulled off her tight cap, so that the cooling breeze might loosen the heavy masses of her short, dark hair.

"I'm asking your pardon, for spoiling your fun." Rufe drew a deep breath. "I'm Rufus Larkin—I love horses too, and I know how you feel."

"Then you won't think me silly."

Lovingly, she patted the dark heads that came nozzling against her. Then, with a sigh of reluctance, turned to go back to her deserted pony.

Immediately, the girl's fellow performers fell into line, to follow. But at her gently spoken word of com-

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mand, they came to an obedient stand-still, under an overhanging brow of the ridge.

Rufe felt suddenly glad, as he cut his big stride to keep pace with Flora Jones, that he had not been born a horse. There was such a glamor in being permitted to walk beside this flesh and blood version of the dream of spangled charm that had thrilled him, at the tent show. Queer, that they should meet like this, after the tantalizing way the memory of her had disturbed and haunted him.

"It makes me sick," he finally blurted out, "to think I handled you so rough!"

She laughed, impishly, as she was about to mount.

"Those bruises may remind me to practice more caution, hereafter—"

She had glanced back at Jim and Barry, and the swift change in her expression made Rufe turn to find the cause of her sudden alarm.

Docile to her command, the black beauties still stood almost rigid. But crouched on the jutting rock above them was the mountain lion for which Rufe had so futilely lain in wait.

The girl's low groan betrayed a sense of hopelessness, in face of that hideously impending doom. But there are times when a man's practiced trigger-finger seems to move more quickly than his conscious brain. As Rufe saw that tawny body leap in a graceful arc toward the broad backs right below, aiming and firing were an almost mechanical response.

Shot in midair, the lion's huge body first jerked, and then convulsed, with a spine-chilling outcry. Then it plunged against the flank of one of the blacks, to send both horses into a frenzied lunge for safety.

The wounded wild creature still writhed and clawed the air, as Rufe ran forward. But by the time he had put an end to its mad threshing, he turned to find that a serious peril had sprung up on the plain. At the first vibration of the lion's cry, every animal within hearing had gone into instinctive panic, augmented to a milling stampede, by the aimless galloping of the fear-ridden blacks.

"Princess—Oh, Miss Flora!"

There was no answer. The faint light was dimmed by the swish of rushing bodies, and moving clouds of hoof-swirled dust.

Under the big cowboy's sturdy ribs, there came a sharp contraction. What if the girl had been bowled over—trampled?

Risking life and limb, to gain height, Rufe fairly leaped to the back of a passing sorrel, and cried out again:

"Here I—am! Had to run over this way—" The answer to his call came in dust-strangled gasps. But in a few seconds, Rufe had reached Flora Jones, and swept her off her mount to the comparative safety of a seat before him.

One arm around his prize, his knees controlling the sorrel, Rufe tried to fend off rough contacts, as he strove to reach the outskirts of the mêlée. Outwardly calm, he knew that his blood was racing in a hotter stampede than ever could be produced by pounding hoofs. It was like forest fires, this surging heat of desire—this longing to go on like this, endlessly, with the slender, panting form of Flora Jones clinging against his breast, trusting to his protection—.

Wrapt in glowing thoughts, it almost shocked him when the girl suggested, after a time, that the horses were quieting down. Under his steady look, her color deepened, as though through the tender rose-light of the oncoming dawn, and when she slipped to the ground, it was with an unconscious little sigh.

"What a night it's been! And what a marksman you are, to have caught that lion in the very midst of his spring!"

"A night to remember—" Rufe's voice was a little unsteady. "But as far as the shooting goes—" His even teeth flashed briefly. "Well, that little old gun just happens to fit my palm."

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Then he added soberly, "Everything's sure made for a purpose. If that lion hadn't lured me out here, and kept me markin' time, I might never have met you."

Her laugh mocked him gently.

"Is that flattery balm for my bruises?" she teased.

But his flushing face shamed her.

"That was mean of me! As if you hadn't made up for that, saving my chums, and then rescuing me, on top of it!"

"I've thought of another way to make it up to you. Maybe I can fix it so you can see Jim and Harry right often. Even practice on them, to keep your hand in, while your waiting—"

"Oh, could you?" The question was an upwelling of delight. "Secretly, I'm banking on buying those horses back, when our ship comes in."

"Hope he don't put faith in these hills, if he's diggin' gold, this brother of yours."

"His faith is in the hills, but only as a hiding place," she laughed. "But you needn't tell that to people. His success sort of depends on the thing being kept secret. Help me catch my pony, won't you? My brother, Conklin's away, but I want to get back to the hotel before anyone is stirring to discover my escapade."

When she refused to let him accompany her any farther than the road, Rufe informed Flora Jones that he was booked for the dance and shooting contest, that was to be given at Paulin's hotel, on the Saturday night of that week.

"Reckon you'll spare me a dance?" The question was frankly eager. It brought an odd look to her eyes. But her lashes corralled the glance, as Rufe stooped to read it.

"Well—maybe!" With that she was off.

It was when Rufe retraced his way, to retrieve his deserted rifle, that he picked up the paper that was to cause him so much distress. It was torn, soiled by grass and dirt, and very much trampled. But it had evidently been a note, and the few words still decipherable suggested a curious meaning, to the cowboy now reading it.

"'—faith in these outlaws'—'mighty well hidden—' 'We'll round up a fortu'—' 'Hustle out—cans'."

Rufe stared at the thing uncomfortably; had his frequent experiences as deputy under Sheriff Watson made him too sharply suspicious?

"Well hidden outlaws, planning to round up a fortune—if that note fell from Conklin Jones' coat pocket, when I yanked his little sister down, it's no wonder he's making her promises of better times! Wonder what 'cans' stands for?"

Rufe pondered the thing, bringing in his kill, until he suddenly remembered that Flora Jones seemed fully aware of what kept her brother in the hills.

"If there was anything crooked about it," he decided, loyally, "a girl like her wouldn't stand for it."

The thought brought distinct relief. And Rufe was no sooner in his bunk, than he fell into open-eyed dreams.

No wonder his heart had persisted in keeping the picture of that wisp of lavender daintiness! Nothing lovelier had ever stood on tiptoe, to throw kisses from brightly rouged lips.

"They're even prettier — plumb clean!"

Then he added, tenderly: "Steady, too, when there's danger—but sweetest when they tremble over being separated from her four-footed pals! Would a feller ever have the nerve to —nerve to—Gee!" Rufe's eyes closed, and his heart began to thump. Boldly, imagination was bringing the tremulous magic of that mouth so near—so near—

"She'd never be willing!" he groaned. "She'd be distant and cold as a snow-crowned peak!"

And yet, even the snow-topped peaks sometimes warmed rosily, to reflect the flaming worship of the passionate sun. What if the fever in a

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man's own breast could work some miracle like that?

AT the Paulin's Hotel Contest, that Saturday night, Rufe Larkin watched the door more attentively than he did the target.

At last, desperate in his disappointment, he asked Ferret Paulin if the circus folk never joined in the general fun.

His long body hunched, the young man squinted along his gun, and wrinkled the nose that had helped to earn him his nickname. Then he spat, and replied: "That damn high-f'lutin' brother of her'n, rode off, last evening, into the hills, with a bumpy lookin' sack on his saddle. More'n likely, he's left orders she's not to mix with us scum."

Rufe's eyes narrowed.

"Does that mean you got kinder too fresh, and he warned you off?"

Ferret's watery eyes took on a sinister cast.

"He's the one needs warnin'," he confided, with a knowing sneer. "Why should a man just stay long enough to get his sister settled, and then make off, into the wilds? In this part of the country, where everything on four legs is like as not to be strayin', it looks better for a man to tell where he spends his nights—"

Rufe's face flushed uncomfortably, as Ferret signaled that it was his turn to shoot. It was with some difficulty that he steadied his hand, and managed to graze the bull's-eye.

"Wish you'd lend me that gun," begged Ferret. "Truest little fire iron I ever see."

"I never lend it." The apparent meaning of Flora Jones' tantalizing "maybe," had filed the big cowboy's temper.

"I'll buy it—pay double what you gave."

"Not for sale."

But as Rufe turned to the door, Ferret followed, insistently raising his offer.

"Say, can't you understand?" Rufe opened the door with a jerk. "No money in the world will buy that gun, Ferret Paulin—"

He stopped. He was almost shouting at a slim figure approaching the shooting gallery.

"Miss—Flora!" he stuttered. No spangles, now. No baggy, shapeless garments. A soft, clingy kind of dress, delicately girlish, wholly fascinating.

"Sure thought you weren't coming!" beamed Rufe. Then as the strains of a violin came from the dance hall, he hastily forestalled Ferret Paulin, in an invitation to dance.

As Ferret brushed by them, and through the porch door, Flora shivered a little.

"His look was like a dart of yellow venom."

"Jealousy," said Rufe. "Did your brother have to jump him?"

"Warned him he'd wring his neck, if he bothered me, while I was here alone."

'He shouldn't have left you. Old Paulin's a good scout. But I wouldn't trust Ferret the length of a lasso."

"Conklin's business was urgent." There was resentment in her tone, at his implied criticism.

"She worships her brother," thought Rufe. "Be terrible, if anything was wrong—" Then, as they reached the dance hall his arms went around her, and rational musings ceased.

"Shortest dance ever!" he complained, when the music ceased. "And if we stay here, some of these hungry-eyed punchers will be gobbling you up—"

Rufe was walking on air as he led her down to the pine-sentineled shore of the lake. Meshed in its ripples, the stars twinkled no less intimately than the countless fireflies that lent romance to the darkness.

"The world is so lovely," sighed the girl. "Why does it have to be marred by people like Ferret? He hates Conklin. I may be foolish, but I have a sort of secret foreboding—"

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"Ferret is sore. He feels he's being cheated out of a fair chance to make love to you. A man like that can work himself into a dangerous mood. That's why I'm going to make you a present of this gun of mine, when I go tonight."

"You funny cowboy! Do you think I'd accept it? Didn't I hear you refusing to part with it, even for a very handsome offer?"

"I want to feel you've got something to depend on."

"But where," she demanded, teasingly, "would you ever find another, to fit the hollow of your palm, so perfectly?"

"Where," he flashed back, "could I ever find another girl, to fit so snugly, into the hollow of my arms?"

"Now—you're impertinent. And I thought we were to be friends!"

"We are. I'm aiming to build on that."

"I'm going back to those 'hungry-eyed punchers,' in the dance hall. They're probably more mannerly!"

She swung off, but in three great strides he had reached her and caught her elbow.

"I forbid you to follow me!"

"That's what you did to Jim and Harry. And it pretty nigh proved bitter medicine for them, Flora. It would for me, too. I'll just naturally keep following you, as long as my strength holds out. And for the same reason those blacks do it—because they love—"

"You're exasperating!"

"Just honest."

"Then I'll be just as honest with you: If I weren't broke, I'd not spend ten days in this wild old West of yours. I hate its dull prairies, and bleak, rocky hills! If only Conklin gets the break he's looking forward to, I'll buy Jim and Harry, and go back to the gayety, and color, and applause, and the smell of fresh sawdust!"

Rufe winced. But he had lived too long among the hills to miss their lesson of patience. And, with all he most longed for at stake, the prospect of a struggle did not make him flinch.

"This big tent over our heads," he said softly, "sure has it all over any canvas top! And, oh, Flora! If you could ever just let yourself feel about me, like I'm feeling for you, this minute—you'd know that life holds lots bigger thrills than you'll ever corral, bareback-ridin'!"

She stared at his earnest face, as if swayed, in spite of herself.

Then, suddenly releasing her, Rufe twitched a spring from the sage bush at his feet, and pressed it into her soft palm.

"If ever you want a whiff of something good, cuddle *that* under your pretty nose!"

She accepted the challenge with a half-resentful lough.

"Sawdust, and the life it stands for, will always be sweeter to me," she declared, with defiance.

"Maybe sawdust stands for—someone you've left behind? I remember noticing that dark-haired trapeze performer, lingering to walk out with you."

"You *are* observant! Well, Alonzo has booked with another show, and he's worknig to get us in there. He's so clever in his line!"

"Better line for monkeys than it is for men, by the look of it. Still, if you like him, and that life—the battle is between sawdust and sage."

"There'll be no contest. I'm not going to see you again."

"'Fraid you'll have to, when you're ready to buy Jim and Harry."

"Indeed!"

"Mr. Perry had a good offer from an outsider, this morning. I had planned to get hold of the horses, anyway."

("You bought them—to save me from disappointment—"

"And for purposes of brib'ry," he supplemented, boldly. "Wednesday, I'm taking them to a bit of smooth ground, where it will be just right for you to give them a bit of exercise."

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"So they won't be out of practice, when Alonzo lands my engagement?"

"Damn Alonzo! Flora, will three o'clock be all right?"

"It's very unlikely, Mr. Larkin." At the steps of the porch she sent back a distinctly cool, "good night!"

IT was not until early Wednesday morning that Rufe recollected having failed to give Flora Jones the peculiar note he had picked up on the scene of the stampede. And it was while examining the tracks of the insolent rustler who had worked on the property of Sheriff Watson himself, that Rufe recalled the fact.

Ferret Paulin, known for making mysteries his hobby, was right on the spot, to offer the benefit of his conclusions.

"A one-man job, plain enough. And done by a stranger. No man in this part of the country ever owned boots that made prints like them—see the flat, wide heel? Queer lookin' mud here, too. Redder than any place I know of. Kinder drizzly last night. Wonder if they've looked for tracks?" He disappeared, to return in triumph with the announcement that he had discovered a few reddish marks, pointing toward the lake, and the hills.

That afternoon, as Rufe rode up to the hotel, with an extra horse for Flora, Ferret met him with smothered excitement.

"Come see what I found—" Some distance down the road red mud like that on Sheriff Watson's place, had apparently been scraped from a man's boots, against a prone tree trunk.

Rufe felt his fingers tingling with a mad itch for Ferret's throat, as he saw a meaning smile grow on his thin-lipped mouth, when they returned to the porch.

"That circus feller vis'ted his sister, aw'ile, last night. Went off late—"

"You damned weasel! You'd like to break this girl's heart, and tie this onto her brother, just in dirty revenge, because he—"

"What a notion! No, solvin' crimes jest natch'ly interests me. Well, there comes Miss Jones up from the lake. Aimin' to go ridin' with her? Have a good time!"

Ferret's eyes, darting jealous hatred, belied the oily pleasantness of his tone, as he disappeared toward the woodland trail. Through the big cowboy's strong frame, a wave of chivalrous tenderness surged, anew. Somehow, no matter at what personal cost, he must warn and protect Flora. Yes, and even though it was against his principles, protect her brother, if he were guilty. No telling how bitter the ranch and townspeople might grow, against these aloof strangers, with Ferret's ever increasing clues to goad them into action!

"Good evening!" Rufe stepped forward, and took the girl's hand.

"Oh, is this *Wednesday?*"

Rufe's heart bounded, at the little pretense that betrayed she had been watching for him.

"Lucky you're dressed for riding. Jim and Harry are right impatient." He dangled his temptation.

"Oh, but I'm not—I mean—" A sudden laugh broke the restraint she had raised between them. "I've got to bring my proper 'bareback' slippers," she capitulated. "They are in our costume trunk. It's in Conklin's room, and the lid is so heavy, I'll have to ask you to raise it for me."

In obliging her, Rufe Larkin got the ugliest jolt of misery his young heart had ever experienced.

In the top tray of the trunk lay a pair of heavy patent leather boots. The heels were broad, and quite flat. There was every evidence that red mud had been recently, but carelessly, scraped from their soles.

"Your brother must have worn those boots in last night's rain—" Rufe's tongue had gone almost dry. It was hateful to have to acknowledge that Ferret's shrewd reasoning was perfectly capped by the chance discovery of this last link of evidence.

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"Conk only wears those boots in the arena." The girl glanced toward them carelessly, as she rummaged.

Rufe swallowed hard.

"There's *mud* on them!"

"So there is! How funny!"

It wasn't a bit funny to the man whose soul was sick at the thought of the shock the near future must hold for her. To him, it was tragic proof that her brother's business in the hills was a ruse, by which he pulled the wool over her eyes.

"In doing a neighborhood job," thought Rufe. "Jones was cautious enough to use a foot covering that no one around here had ever seen him wear, or knew he owned!"

"I've got the slippers at last—why, whatever are you doing?"

Rufe colored hotly. He had been trying to wipe the boots clean, with his handkerchief.

"Please don't bother, they won't soil anything else. Besides, I want to scold Conk, for throwing them in, all messy. Slam down the lid, and let's start. No, there's no key. It seems to have been lost out of the lock, since we came here."

"I've got to tell her," thought Rufe, miserably. But he put the grim task off, because it seemed cruel to cloud the light that illumined her face, at the mere prospect of a rendezvous with her circus pets.

Later, while Jim and Harry circled to permit a rehearsal of Flora's well remembered performance, Rufe contrived to hide his unhappiness. But his heart was as heavy as the girl's gymnastics were buoyant.

"Only natural, she wants to get back to the gay admiration," he sighed; "too much to give up, for the love of a lumbering sagebrusher! Likely as not, there's an understanding, between her and that handsome trapeze dude, that keeps the scent of sawdust sweet in her nostrils."

"Had I better stop?" The girl skipped from Jim's flank to stand before Rufe. "The horses haven't been exercised much: I mustn't overdo it."

Nodding, Rufe turned hastily to giving the horses his attention. Warmly flushed, and alluringly breathless, the little circus princess filled him with a longing all his strength could barely subdue.

During the ride back, Flora was still glowing with the memory of her gay practice.

"After all," she admitted, after a long breath of the cool twilight breeze, "these big open spaces you brag about, *do* grow on a person!" Then she added, ruefully, "I'll be liking them, by the time I have to leave!"

Rufe looked up quickly.

"I've had a letter from Alonzo. There's an opening for me, if I can come on, right off. I wish I'd known of this last night. It may be days before I can get in touch with Conklin, to discuss it."

Rufe stared hard at his horse's head. It was like a knife-stab, to think of Flora's going out of his life! A rankling jealousy tore him, till his strong teeth gritted. And yet—wasn't this a heaven-sent opportunity? If he could get her away, before Ferret Paulin succeeded in his ruthless determination to expose her brother's villainy, the girl would be saved the agony of open disgrace. What did his own suffering matter, in comparison?

"If you're anxious to go," he made an effort to speak in a commonplace tone, "I can lend you what you'll need, in the way of cash. And if you need Jim and Harry, I'll be satisfied to let you take them. Maybe they'll make you remember—your visit here—"

"You are certainly generous." Her words were polite. But they held more of a faint resentment than of gratitude.

Rufe felt her eyes on him, as he went on, "I'll undertake to explain things to your brother—" He stopped, to frown. It was bitter, this thing of flinging her into another man's arms!

For a time, they rode in silence. Then Flora said, rather crisply, "Nat-

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urally, I'm not accepting your offer. I'll wait for my brother's advice!"

"If she stays," thought Rufe, "I've got to warn her. It would kill her, to have the bolt come from the blue—"

Three times he failed to get started. But when they dismounted, and Flora insisted upon his coming in to spend the evening, Rufe saw an opening for his hateful task.

"I can't," he said. "I'm on patrol duty, to-night. Watching our land, from the ridge, on the boundary—"

"Another lion?"

"Worse. Guess you heard about Sheriff Watson losing two of his best horses? The whole county is getting to see red, over this rustling. Keeping secret lookouts, in a general campaign to catch the man, or men. Oh, I keep forgetting to give you this paper; picked it up, where we first met. Looks like it must have dropped from the pocket of the coat you had on—" He studied her expression, furtively.

"It's from one of Conklin's friends, his partner, in fact."

"His partner in—?"

"In this secret enterprise." His curiosity seemed to surprise her. "I'm in the know, but since I've promised not to tell—"

"I don't want you to tell!"

Something clutched at Rufe's throat.

"If you love your brother, for God's sake warn him that the chances are strong he'll be invited to jail, or a necktie party. With the rough element, resentment runs flaring and high, around here. Get a message to him," he blurted, "clean that mud off his boots, or let me sneak 'em out, and bury 'em."

In spite of the gathering rage in the lovely, indignant eyes before him, he blundered on:

"Burn that letter! It's rotten evidence, against a man who's suspected of stealing horses, and hiding them with a confederate in the hills—"

"Stop! Are you trying to tell me —you believe my brother is just—*a common thief?*"

"Flora, Flora—this is worse than snake-bite, but there just doesn't seem any other way to figure—"

"Then—" her eyes flashed on him, "your reasoning will probably go on to the discovery that I'm dishonest, too! Wouldn't it be sensible to conclude that I was trying to *get away* with Jim and Harry, that first night? That after you'd caught me, I played off innocent, and tricked you? Oh, this is what your object was, all along! Just to find out—"

"Honey, please! Can't you see how being forced to warn you has hurt me? I've had no thought, except for your brother's safety, and trying to save your feelings, because I love you—so hard!"

"Love?" She flung back the word in disdain. "Your suspicious brain doesn't even know the meaning of the word! I won't do a thing to imply even a single doubt of my only brother's honesty! I won't clean those arena boots, nor destroy that note—"

"Please, dear!"

"Don't touch me! Don't even dare to speak to me again!" A smothered sob, then: "Oh, I never dreamed I could hate a living soul—as I'm hating you now, Rufe Larkin!"

He saw her run from him, and shivered, as if under the chill of doom. This was the end of all his protective hopes. Disaster hung over her, and he was powerless to help. Even his duty to the community had been ignored, in the effort to shield her from misery. She had misunderstood. He had been too clumsy to put his warning in a softer light. Only the insult seemed plain to her!

And she had flung his declaration of love back into his teeth, with the unbelief of contempt. That was what hurt. Hurt, until the ache in his breast was like a festering wound—

Rufe mounted, stiffly, and rode slowly off.

"Had a nice afternoon?"

Ferret's lean form loomed through the gathering darkness. Instinctively,

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Rufe guessed that he had been down to tell Sheriff Watson of the mud on the fallen tree trunk. By morning, the sheriff would probably come hunting for clues of his own. And then—

"Nothing left to live for?" rasped Rufe to himself. "What about the satisfaction of strangling this weasely skunk of a tale-bearer?"

The mere thought lightened his gloom. But before he could act, another hobbled it. Selfish as was the cause of his incentive, this love-thwarted half-wit was a better citizen than a man whose love weakened him to protect an unknown rascal!

"Yes. A nice afternoon." Rufe's answer was mechanical, as he started down the road, with the second horse following.

"Both of us fools," he thought; "dog-gonest kind. He, trying to trap Conklin Jones, because he thinks he killed his chances with his sister. I, risking everything to warn Jones, to save her worry. And all the time, she doesn't give a damn for either one of us, and is all for the sawdust, and that gymnasticating monkey, in his pretty blue tights!"

It was with his chin sunk against a aching breast, that Rufe sat in ambush, on guard, on the ridge, that night. And because his thoughts were all of Flora, the sight of her riding toward him, at midnight, seemed a production of his brain.

"Rufe Larkin!"

She peered up, unable to discover his hiding place, till he abandoned it, and slipped down to her.

"I said I hated—never wanted to speak to you again—" her voice was trembling pitiful, "but the moment I had to face trouble, somehow—*you* were my first thought."

Gratification thrilled him as he gently demanded what had happened.

"Sheriff Watson has been to the hotel, questioning me. I couldn't answer most of his questions, without breaking my word to Conklin. But he made me see how queerly Conk's actions have impressed some people. Why, he's going to send a posse out, to hunt for him, in the morning! I felt so alarmed, after the sheriff left, I decided to take your advice about the boots, but I was too late. I'm afraid the sheriff seized them!"

Rufe hid his dismay, and soothed her hand, unrebuked.

"The posse will be expecting to find him hiding a string of horses, and as long as they don't—"

"But they *will*, that's what frightens me. There may be violence, before proper explanations can be made. Oh, if only I hadn't promised to keep silent—"

There were lines of perplexity on Rufe's face, as he mounted, and soberly motioned her to follow.

"I'll take you to the ranch house. Mr. Perry's head is longer than mine, and his heart's a nugget. We'll tell what we can, and beg his advice. I'll send another man out to ride guard."

But the journey to the ranch house was oddly interrupted. In skirting a shallow stream, they passed behind a line of gaunt tree trunks. And to the last of these, a pair of colts had been tied.

Rufe had barely drawn Flora's horse into the shadow, when a figure, leading a third colt, came over a knoll, beyond.

"A rustler!" Swiftly, they dismounted, close to the screen of timber. "Probably planned his getaway, through the bed of the stream—"

"If this is the man the sheriff is after, and you capture him, Rufe, it will prove Conk's innocence, instantly. Don't you see?" Her faint whisper ceased, as his fingers softly brushed her lips.

"He's as good as caught!" Just a breath, against her ear.

Elation tingled along the cowboy's veins. He was to be Flora's champion, after all! Life was good—But the marauder was coming nearer. Almighty heaven, what was he wearing on his feet?

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Swaying, in dismay, Rufe forced Flora into better hiding.

There was not a doubt in his soul, but that the girl's brother had slipped in and out of the hotel unseen, and was up to his usual tricks. As he watched, it was plain to Rufe that the man was printing his boot marks with careful deliberation. Making evidence, no doubt, with the intention of getting rid of the boots, when the hunt for their owner had started a wild goose chase!

"Don't get hurt!" A cautious wraith of a whisper, from Flora.

Her alarm for him was sweet, but Rufe shuddered. Better be killed, than have to face her with the announcement that he'd ruined her life, by bringing her brother to justice. The bitterness of this duty! Had chance ever brought a man face to face with anything uglier? After the work now before him, how would he ever dare come to the woman he loved, and plead for her kindness?

"This time," thought Rufe, "her hate will be real!" His teeth clamped. "But I've got to go through with it!"

Instantly, he leaped into the open, toward his objective. But the shot he fired was very low, for the fear of killing the intruder dominated his determination to effect his capture.

Almost immediately, the rustler lunged toward the colt, now straining wildly to avoid the gunplay. But Rufe, dodging the stranger's return fire, ran closer, and with a careful shot, severed the rope that held the colt.

Unwilling to lose so speedy a means of escape, the man made a sharp move to recapture the excited animal. But, unfortunately for his scheme, the great boots he wore impeded his progress. And when they finally tripped him into sprawling, it was to catch in his breast the bullet Rufe Larkin had aimed to check the motion of his legs.

Aghast, Rufe bent over the man upon whom he had apparently inflicted a mortal wound. How diabolically Fate had trapped him! The mere thought of him, after this, would bring a spasm of resentment and pain to the heart he had so longed to win!

"Take the handkerchief from across the man's face, Rufe."

The cowboy trembled, at the touch of the fingers on his shoulder. Flora had come to him, confidently, to ask for help in protecting her brother, and his answer was this!

"Let the sheriff, or the doctor be the first to unmask him!" To have her discover his deed, at that moment, was more than Rufe felt he could stand.

"But the man must have air, he's hurt!" she bent over them, insistently; then suddenly gasped, "Look what he's wearing—Conklin's arena boots!"

"Yes—damn them! If they hadn't tripped me — I wouldn't 'a' been caught!"

At sound of those oddly familiar tones, Rufe's fingers suddenly found strength to expose his captive's features.

"Ferret Paulin!" What surging relief!

"Yes, you've done for me—"

Rufe blew a shrill signal for help, while the wounded man raved feverishly.

"Damn you! How should I know you'd be riding guard?"

"You sneaked those boots once too often, Ferret. They tricked you to your ruin; spoiled your careful plot to lay a crime on the shoulders of an innocent man. To-morrow, you planned to let the sheriff find them, in Conklin Jones' trunk, I suppose. That would have about cinched the evidence!"

"I wanted to drag him down, off his high horse." Paulin broke into groaning oaths, before adding, "He can't run me round in circles, at the crack of his whip, like he does circus beasts!"

A half dozen riders came hastening to investigate Rufe's signal, and the big cowboy turned his prisoner over to them, with the necessary explanations.

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"I can't help forgiving poor Ferret," Flora admitted, when she and Rufe were alone. "You were right, about his being half-witted."

"I'm half crazy myself," he said, huskily, "crazy with love for you, Flora. But not crazy enough to believe that sage will ever be half as sweet to you, as sawdust."

Tense silence. Then, in a tone that fired his blood, she said, "Do you think your big fingers could find what's hidden in the pocket of my blouse?"

Every vein tingling, Rufe proved they could, and drew out the sprig of sage he had given her.

"I grew to treasure it—for your sake." She laughed happily, as his swift ecstasy engulfed her. "After that night, sawdust lost half its charm. The thrills I'd know under a canvas tent seemed cheap."

"Lord knows I didn't want to lose you!" he told her fervently.

"I feel you've earned my confidence, too, about Conklin's business venture. You see, Conk and one of the trainers from our disbanded show, picked up a batch of wild horses, in Southern Utah. Up there in the hills, they are educating them to be top notch buckers. If any go through the coming rodeo season, unridden, the investment will pay high. Outlaw horses are in big demand."

"But all this secrecy?"

"To keep prospective riders from spying out their bucking styles."

"And that letter?"

"It was brought down by a boy, sent to guide Conklin to the place his partner had picked out. As well as I remember, it read like this: 'I've faith in these outlaws to prove a sensation. Will keep them mighty well hidden. We'll round up a fortune on exhibitions. Bustle out with those cans.'"

"So that was the mysterious bundle Ferret saw your brother lug into the hills! Tin cans, to jangle from their saddles, and make 'em buck all the harder!" Rufe laughed, then sobered, to say, "Talking of horses—how soon are you going to let me give Jim and Harry, to my little wife?"

"As soon as Conk comes in—that is, if you marry the girl you're just trying to kiss!"

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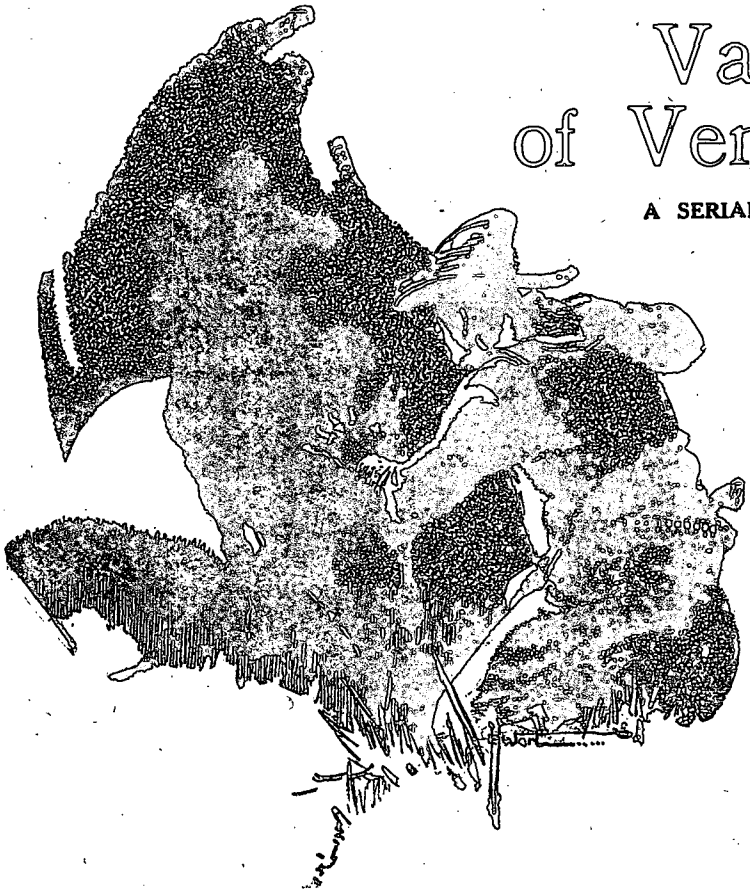

Valley of Vengeance

A SERIAL ROMANCE

By Marshal South

PART ONE

The man from Jacumba came straight into the horror that hung over Terrible Valley, ready to face whatever befell. In the midst of haunting terrors and belching guns, he found a girl who was one in a thousand, and fought his way out to happiness, side by side with her.

CHAPTER I

The White Terror

JIM BRANDON stopped with a startled jerk and faced round in his tracks. The thing was still following him!—over his shoulder, as he glanced back, he had seen it again. And this time it had been much closer.

Brandon was no craven—in all of his twenty-eight years of life he had never been accused of cowardice—but as he stood there in the gloom of the thickening dusk and strained his eyes back into the shadows that cloaked the lonely desert trail over which his plodding footsteps had carried him, he was conscious of something that was uncomfortably like terror.

The spectral, silent shape that for the past mile had trailed him through the shadows of the creosote bushes, was uncanny. Each time that he had glanced back he had caught a fleeting glimpse of it—yet each time when he had halted and stared into the darkness of the back trail it was gone. Still he was certain that he was not mistaken; the flash glimpses that he had had of it were sufficient to convince him that his eyes were playing him no tricks. The thing, whatever it was, was ghostly white. It moved without sound of footfall.

Brandon strained his ears, listening. But no sound came to him through the thickening night. The silence of the desert was absolute. And once more, as it had done so many times already, the queer, pale shape that followed him had melted and vanished again into the blotting obscurity of the mesquites and creosotes that bordered the sandy road.

In spite of himself Brandon felt shaken and unnerved. Had it been daylight—had it been any other section of California—had he had a horse under him even—he would have laughed at the strange fear which, since the coming of evening, had begun to lay

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hold upon him, a fear which had reached a climax with the discovery of the pale, persistent shape that was dogging his footsteps. At any other time or place he would have dismissed his apprehensions without a second thought. But now, however, he felt far from sure of his nerve.

The toilsome tramp through the foothills and the waterless misery of his all-day plodding through the sand of the seemingly interminable trail that led up the valley, had sapped his physical endurance to the point of exhaustion. His feet, swollen and blistered from the torture of walking in high-heeled boots, gave him misery with each step, and his body still ached dully from the bruises he had sustained that morning when his pony had fallen crashing into the canyon.

Added to all this was the agony of a burning thirst. Jim Brandon was near the point of physical collapse and it did not help his thin remnant of resistance to remember that this desolate desert valley under the black shadow of the towering Laguna Mountains had a sinister reputation. Wild tales were told about it. Many of the old-timers who knew its history avoided it and the few surviving Indians of the region, dwelling now on reservations high up in the mountains that bordered the valley to the westward, steadfastly refused to descend into it.

Swaying unsteadily on his weary feet and peering uneasily into the bulking gloom of the shadows from which the white sandy ribbon of the trail emerged wanly, Brandon cursed himself for a fool. Why, he asked himself, hadn't he gone on direct to Yuma? That was where he'd been headed for until the tales of that old fool, Seth Ross, in Jacumba had fired his curiosity. Once back in Arizona he'd have gotten a job easily enough. Why had he been idiot enough to abandon a certainty for the slim chance that this one-horse Truman outfit, towards which he was headed, might need a cowhand? They probably didn't anyhow—even that old liar Ross had warned him as much. And now, just for a fool curiosity—just for a fool romantic notion—he had lost his horse and everything that he had in the world. And it began to look mighty like he might also lose—

With a savage mustering of his remaining will power, Brandon thrust this last grim thought from him, and, turning resolutely, plodded painfully on. The whole valley couldn't be deserted, surely, he told himself. True he had passed no sign of habitation since he had been following this trail up the wash, but it stood to reason he must come to something soon—some ranch or some shack. People must live here somewhere, or else why this road? California had settled a lot everywhere since the days when the old Butterfield stage route had first traced out this desolate desert trail. There must be houses or ranches somewhere. The Truman outfit couldn't be so far off now. And there was the old Vallecitos stage station that Ross had told him about—that must be close now. If only he could get somewhere, if only his six-shooter were in his belt now instead of in a San Diego pawnshop. If only he could get some place before that damned white steer, or whatever it was, caught up with him! If only—

Brandon involuntarily quickened his pace, driving his aching limbs frantically. What was that yarn about the Ghost Rider that old Ross had told him? That was another lie—it must be—the ghostly White Horse and the phantom rider that haunted the vicinity of the old stage station—a man would be crazy to believe that! Still—?

The grip of a great fear was closing relentlessly on Brandon. He was running now, weaving and staggering drunkenly through the cumbering sand of the trail that dragged at his boots and hampered his every step. Creosote bushes whipped against his face as he reeled past them; mesquite branches slashed at him thornily, tearing at his clothes and hands. He ran headlong. His breath was coming in great gasps.

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His knees shook under him. A cold sweat seemed to burst suddenly from his every pore. It was galloping after him!—with each step he took it was gaining on him! Without looking, he could feel it, could sense its sudden, whirlwind approach. He plunged on madly.

In spite of himself—forced by a dread impulse against which he struggled vainly—he glanced over his shoulder. God! a hoarse, choking cry broke from his lips. The Ghost Rider! The White Horse! It was there! Almost upon him! It was rearing over him! In the gloom, he caught one flash of a pair of glaring, flame-lit eyes, red and terrible—heard all at once the thunder of beating hoofs—a dreadful cry—

Sick with terror he swerved blindly aside from the trail and plunged frantically into the bordering tangle of shadowy bushes. As he did so his feet struck suddenly against a low ridge of piled stones. He stumbled and fell sprawling into a long shallow depression in the sand in which something pale gleamed wanly.

And as he fell the great white shape at his heels leaped upon him, crushing him, beating him into the sandy earth.

CHAPTER II

Flame

FOR the fleeting fraction of a second, as he went down with a crashing thud, half blinded in a sudden tempest of whirling sand and gravel, Brandon's senses blurred. The fall and the hurtling impact of the thing that had leaped upon him had driven the last remaining gasp of breath from his lungs. His eyes spun in a sudden blinding whirlwind of shooting sparks; the blood roared in his head; his ears were filled with a dreadful snarling and, as in the blind, automatic instinct of self-preservation he flung up an arm to protect his face, he was conscious of stabbing pain; of dreadful fangs tearing and slashing at him—of something that was snarling and roaring in its efforts to reach his throat.

An instant only the hideous tempest beat upon him. Out of black chaos a voice cried suddenly from close at hand. A light flamed. Dimly, as he fought madly against the snarling horror that pinned him down, Brandon was aware of another shape that struggled in the sudden light-glow about him—a figure that dragged and panted and cried out in frantic commands.

And then, sudden as it had launched itself, the white terror leaped back and away.

Shaken and gasping Brandon tottered to his feet. Half blinded in the beam of a small electric torch that was turned full upon his face, he found himself confronting the shadow-hazy figure of a girl. And by her side, red-jawed, glowing-eyed and terrible, stood the most gigantic white hound he had ever seen.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?"

The girl's voice was crisp and clear and as searching as the light in her hand. She swept the torch ray over him deliberately. Dazed as he was, he seemed to feel the sharp hostility in her shadow-masked eyes.

For a moment, still breathless, Brandon made no reply. He struggled out of the shallow trench into which he had fallen and shook his head and face clear of the clinging particles of twigs and gravel that had been hurled upon him. Though shaken and panting, he was conscious of a vast relief that eclipsed, for the instant, his amazement at the girl's sudden appearance. The marrow-freezing horror of fear was gone from him. He had missed death by a fraction, he realized, but the dreadful fangs that had driven into his arm and torn furiously in their efforts to reach his throat had not been those of any ghost-beast. The slavering jaws and huge, gleaming teeth of the great white dog before him were real enough. Their very reality and physical menace seemed to give him a new flood of

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strength and courage in spite of his exhaustion.

The girl repeated her question sharply. For the first time Brandon was aware that behind her, half hidden in the shadows, a saddled horse stood waiting—obviously where she had left it when she had sprung to drag off the dog.

"My name's Brandon, miss—Jim Brandon. I was headed for—"

The girl cut him short with an angry exclamation:

"I don't care about that. What I want to know is why you were digging here in these graves. What were you looking for?" She swept the light beam across the ground at his feet with an imperative, questioning gesture.

Brandon jerked back, startled. In the flooding radiance of the torch he realized suddenly that it was indeed a grave into which he had fallen; an old grave that, plainly enough, had been recently opened. Splintered gray-white fragments, half concealed in the gravelly earth, showed gruesomely here and there on its bottom. The piled rocks which had originally covered the mound had been flung aside by the diggers. It was these scattered stones, Brandon saw now, that had tripped him and caused him to fall headlong into the grave. The realization gave him a chilling shock that for the instant robbed him of speech.

"What were you digging for?" the girl demanded again, angrily. There was a hard, metallic click in her voice. She swept the light in a swift arc over the ground just beyond. A startled exclamation broke from her:

"—all of them! So you opened all four of them? What for? Quick now—and don't lie to me!"

Brandon found his tongue with an effort.

"You're mistaken, miss. Your hound took after me and I tripped and fell in there. I didn't know till this minute what I'd fallen into." His eyes followed the path of the light. With an unpleasant shock he realized that there was more than one grave. Spaced at short intervals from the first were three others. They were evidently all old graves—and all of them had been opened.

The girl stamped her foot. Her temper was mounting.

"Don't try to spring those bedtime stories on me, stranger! You're lying! You're the second four-flusher that's blown into these parts within two days and I'm about fed up. If you can't talk up straight I've a notion to—"

She left the words unfinished, but touched the hound beside her with a meaning gesture. The great beast tensed and gathered himself. His eyes flamed over Brandon hungrily.

"All right then—set your dog on me!" Brandon flared in exasperation. In spite of his weakness and the fact that he could scarcely force speech through his thirst-parched throat, he was conscious of a sudden fierce resentment. The tone and bearing of this unknown girl, with her suspicion and accusations, maddened him. He couldn't see her clearly. Her outline in the shadows behind the glow of the torch told him only that she was slim and not much over five feet tall. She was bare-headed and as nearly as he could make out she was dressed in a shirt, boots and a short riding skirt. And, even though he could not distinguish her features clearly, the sharp ring of her voice told him that she was quite capable of carrying out her unspoken threat and setting her monster hound at him.

Brandon was conscious of a surge of fury. He squared himself. "Set your dog on me if it'll do you any good," he repeated defiantly. "I guess you just don't want to believe anything. I've been hoofing it through this blasted wilderness since an hour after sunup this morning. I'm fed up, too!"

He thrust forward a step, reckless of the deep, coughing snarl of the menacing hound. "Look at me!" he challenged savagely. "Do I look like I've been amusing myself robbing graves?"

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The girl moved the light a fraction so that the beam beat full on his face. For at least a half minute she studied him without speaking. Though no model for a collar advertisement Jim Brandon was far from bad looking. Tall and lean and resilient and with an athletic strength that spoke from every line of him despite his weariness, his keen, clean-shaved face, sun-mellowed and graved in self-reliant lines by the suns and winds of the open range, was by no means unattractive. The seasoned blue eyes were clear and level looking, and the crisp crop of dark brown hair, brought into view by the fact that his battered Stetson had been knocked off in the struggle, did nothing to spoil the picture.

The girl studied him deliberately. She lowered her torch suddenly.

"Maybe you aren't lying," she admitted a trifle grudgingly. "I guess you're half dead from thirst. Where'd you come from? And where's your horse?"

"I headed down here from Jacumba, miss," Brandon answered, his anger cooling with the realization that at least the edge of dangerous hostility had passed out from the girl's tone. "I tried to take a short cut through the hills."

"Through the gorge?" the girl demanded sharply, suspicion flashing back again into her voice. "That trail's impassable."

"It is now," Brandon admitted, "—at least it is in one place. The ledge round the shoulder above that deep canyon crumbled and went down under me. That's where I lost my horse. He went over into the canyon, and I all but went with him. I reckon it's a good two hundred foot fall there."

"Three hundred," the girl corrected coolly. "I guess you were born lucky, cowboy—that's if you're telling me the truth. You walked from there here today—in those boots?"

"Yes, miss."

A half-audible exclamation escaped the girl—whether of sympathy or disbelief, Brandon could not determine. But the light swung away from him as she stepped swiftly back towards her horse and began to untie something from her saddle. The big white hound growled and lurched towards Brandon.

"Midnight! Behave!" There was sharp authority in the tone as the girl checked the dog's threatening move She came forward and handed Brandon a small canteen.

"Here's water," she said. "Go easy now—no more than a mouthful to start with."

The water was warm, but Brandon gulped it gratefully. He needed no warning, however. A scant swallow and he forced himself to lower the vessel from his lips.

"That's right,"—the girl's voice was a trifle more friendly—"I guess you're no tenderfoot, anyhow."

She took the canteen from his hands. "You were real thirsty, right enough," she admitted. "I'll give you some more pretty soon. And maybe you *are* telling me the truth. Midnight did slip away from me awhile. He went on ahead. I guess he'd scented you. It's lucky I caught up with him when I did. You'd have been hash by this time if I hadn't."

Her fingers were busy replacing the stopper of the canteen. Closer to her and with his nerves and eyes steadied a little by the swallow of water, Brandon could see the outlines of her face more clearly. He wondered who she was. That she was still suspicious of him he sensed plainly enough. He sensed also that it was not only himself—it was something also in connection with the opened graves beside him that had roused her suspicion and hostility. Who was she? Her face was exasperatingly veiled by the dimness behind the torch-glow. He wished he could see it clearly. In spite of his exhaustion he felt the surge of a burning curiosity, a curiosity that all at once flashed a sudden thought to his mind. Could she be—?

The half-formed question was answered almost before it had leaped to

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his brain. A sudden twist of the girl's wrist as she fumbled at the canteen with both hands flung the beam of the little pocket torch full on her face. Brandon took an involuntary step back, his suspicion startlingly verified. The face, that for an instant had flashed up before him in all its details, was that of a young girl of not over twenty; a face the like of which an inspired painter might create once in a lifetime; a face dazzling almost in its delicate molding; clean, golden-tinted outdoor beauty and deep blue eyes—and about it, like a halo, flashing back the light like a glowing mist of glorious red-gold fire, was a great clustering bob of tumbled, waving curls. Brandon caught his breath in a gasp. It was Flame—Flame Truman—the girl from the Truman ranch, towards which he was headed; the girl whose face and wonderful red hair old Seth Ross had described to him so minutely—the girl, tales of whom, more even than the old prospector's yarns, had been the urge which had drawn him aside into this grim, wild country.

It was Flame—Flame of Terrible Valley!

CHAPTER III

Mystery

BUT Brandon was given little time for astonishment. The beam of light which had fallen on the girl's face as she replaced the canteen stopper, passed in an instant and left her features again veiled in shadows.

"You haven't told me yet where you were going?" The question came abruptly, but the girl's voice had lost much of its raw harshness. As she swept the light over him again Brandon realized that, busied for the moment as she had been, his involuntary start of surprise at recognition had passed her by unnoticed.

"I was headed for your ranch, Miss Flame,"—flustered as he was at discovery of her identity, Brandon unconsciously used the girl's first name, a name that had somehow rung in his head incessantly since he had first heard it from the lips of old Ross—"I was headed up there. I thought that maybe—"

"How do you get that—!" Sharp as the crack of a whip, the girl cut him short. "How do you get that stuff?" she demanded. "I've never seen you before in my life! How do you know who I am?"

"I—I met an old-timer named Seth Ross in Jacumba, miss"—Brandon was staggered a little by the sudden fury of suspicion in her voice—"he told me about you an' I recognized you just now when the light flashed on your face. Ross said your uncle had a cow ranch up here a ways in a little side valley to the west of this one, right up at the foot of the mountains—Terrible Valley I guess they call it. I'm hunting a job and I thought maybe your uncle might need a good cowhand."

"Oh, so that's it!" Vast relief was in the girl's tone, a relief that was shadowed by annoyance. "So it was old Ross who started you down here. That's about what he would do—he's got no more sense than to do that! It's too bad, but you're out of luck. We don't need any hands—outfit's too small. We do all our work ourselves. And besides—"

She broke off, as though checking something that had almost slipped her tongue. "Let's see how bad you're hurt," she said abruptly. "Did Midnight chew you much?"

"Only my arm, miss—and that don't amount to anything. He didn't have time."

"Let's see it."

Obediently Brandon extended his right arm for her inspection. She ran the light over it.

"I guess you were born lucky, all right," she said in relief. "He's ripped your shirt up pretty bad but he missed your arm mostly. There's only a few toothmarks and they're not dangerous. I'm glad it's no worse. Midnight's a queer dog—he's almost human—and I

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guess he suspected that you were—"

Again she checked herself sharply as though once more her tongue had almost betrayed her. She handed Brandon the canteen. "You can have another swallow or so now. I guess you've got sense enough not to drink too much. It's too bad that you came all the way down here on a fool's errand. Now you've lost your horse and got chewed up into the bargain, and it might have been much worse. Old Ross ought to have warned you. He must have been crazy to give you the idea that we needed help. He knows better."

She flashed the light away from him to the row of opened graves and, as though on a sudden impulse, stepped quickly towards them, followed instantly by the big white hound. Moving swiftly from one to the other she paused a moment by each and inspected it carefully under the searching rays of the torch.

Brandon gulped a mouthful of water and, canteen in hand, followed her, his weariness displaced for the moment by an overmastering sensation of excitement and mystery. Prepared as he had been by the voluble description of the girl's striking, almost unearthly beauty, which old Seth Ross had poured into his ears, the actuality had stunned him. He still felt a bit dazed by the memory of that flash glimpse he had caught. He was suddenly not at all sorry that he had come, notwithstanding the loss of his pony and the punishment of Midnight's fangs. It was worth it all, even for a glimpse of her.

And there was more. Brandon sensed mystery. A sense of something strange and grim was suddenly upon him. As strongly and unmistakably as the grimness of the valley had pressed upon him, he now felt this new and closer thing. He realized that the girl was laboring under a strain, a feverish anxiety which the easier friendliness that had followed upon her first suspicions of him could not wholly conceal. The opened graves were obviously the cause of her uneasiness. It suddenly flashed on Brandon that Seth Ross had told him something of those graves. But there had been nothing in his story to connect them with the Trumans of Terrible Valley.

The girl was already standing beside the farthest open trench when Brandon reached her side. Her excitement and uneasiness had increased. The light of her torch, streaming down into the long, sandy pit, revealed in startling distinctness the crumbling human fragments that lay on the bottom of it. But it was evident that it was not this that was responsible for her nervousness.

"There was a gang of them," she said, half to herself, flashing the torch about on the trampled earth on the edge of the pit. "And it must have been done some time to-day—I went by here yesterday and they hadn't been dug into then. Say!"—she wheeled suddenly on Brandon—"did anyone, any car, pass you to-day while you were walking?"

Brandon shook his head. "No, miss."

The girl darted out into the sandy road. Her light searched the ground. She gave a cry.

"But they *did* come by car. They must have come from the other direction—down from Mason Valley. And they went back the same way. Here's where they backed their car round." She pointed to the crushed sand and broken bushes on the side of the road where the backing tracks of a big automobile were plainly visible.

"I reckon it was a bunch of city folks down here hunting souvenirs," Brandon suggested, studying the marks. "By the look of the tire tracks they—"

"Souvenirs!"—the girl's interruption was scornful—"who'd want souvenirs from here?"

"Some folks have queer notions," Brandon persisted. "These are the graves of the Morgan gang, aren't they—the bunch that murdered Captain O'Hara way back in fifty-nine and got wiped out themselves the next day trying to hold up the stage?"

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The light came up on his face again with a startled jerk. "You must have wasted a lot of time gabbing with Seth Ross," the girl said dryly. "Yes, this is where the Morgan outfit was buried —where they fell. What's that got to do with souvenirs?"

"Some folks like to collect skulls an' things," Brandon answered. "They've got queer ideas and—"

"Then it's a pity they took all this trouble and then left all the skulls behind 'em after all!" the girl interrupted sharply. "Every one of 'em is still there—what's left of them! Look for yourself! No, the gang that dug in here wasn't looking for that sort of souvenirs. I'll bet they were looking for—" Her teeth clicked shut abruptly over her unfinished words.

"Looking for what?" Brandon demanded.

"Nothing!" the girl snapped shortly.

She turned abruptly, switched off her light and began to walk swiftly back towards her horse.

"Come on!" she called over her shoulder, "I've got to get back home. I'm late now."

Aware that again, by his incautious question, he had trodden upon dangerous ground and aroused the flare of the girl's temper and mistrust, Brandon followed her. He found her fumbling with nervous haste at the saddle of her horse.

"Here!" she said, thrusting a stirrup leather into his hand, "quick! Alter 'em to your length and let's get out of here."

"But I'm not going to take your horse!" Brandon stared at her, astonished. "I'm not that—"

"Don't waste time!" the girl snapped angrily, breaking in upon his amazed stammer. "Fix those stirrups and shut up. I can't leave you here, and we won't make any time if you walk—besides you're too footsore. I'll take you along with me and leave you at old Gus Weidner's shack—I've got to pass there on the way home. Monte can carry double for that far. Gus is away in Julian to-day but he'll be back tomorrow. He won't mind you staying there to-night—I'll leave a note for him. But you're going to ride in front. I'm not fool enough to let you sit behind me. Here! give me that canteen —I'll tie that while you're fixing those stirrups!"

Brandon dragged at the leathers in silence. He was beginning to realize that Ross had spoken truly when he had said that Flame Truman had a gunpowder temper. But there was more than temper and distrust behind her mood now. There was something else weighing upon her—something which he could not fathom. Brandon judged it was a deadly fear of something—fear mixed with rage. But if it was fear, it did nothing to improve her irritable mistrust of him.

Brandon finished with the second leather. In silence, and a bit stiff from sore and aching muscles, he swung himself into the saddle. Scarcely had he touched it than with catlike agility, and scorning aid, the girl was up behind him.

"Just give Monty his head," she said crisply; "he knows the trail. Come on, Midnight!"

She gave a low, short whistle. With the huge white hound flitting ahead like a pale shadow, they swung away into the darkness.

CHAPTER IV

A Trail of Shadows

FOR a mile they rode in silence, the stillness of the desert night broken only by the sand-muffled thud of the horse's hoofs and the ghostly rustle of a thin, cold wind that had begun to gust down from the blackness of the western mountains. Flame spoke suddenly:

"There's springs to the left here, up near the foot of those hills. You weren't so far from water after all, if you'd only known it."

Brandon made no answer. Close upon the heels of his amazement over

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the happenings of the last few minutes, a feeling of depression had settled upon him. In spite of the easing of his thirst, his fatigue had begun to reassert itself and, in addition, he felt keenly the hostility of the girl.

He revolved all the facts in his mind as he remembered them from Seth Ross's rambling yarn about the murder of Captain Terrence O'Hara, discoverer and first owner of the now lost and almost legendary Lucky Ledge mine, and the spectacular attempt of his murderers, a day later, to hold up the Butterfield Stage. An attempted hold-up which had resulted disastrously for the Morgan gang, every member of which had been slain, owing to quick shooting on the part of the stage guard and passengers.

But what had the killing of Captain O'Hara and this frustrated hold-up of the late fifties to do with Flame Truman? Seventy years had passed since then! The thing was absurd.

And yet, from the girl's own actions, he felt convinced that there was a link somewhere. Who were the Trumans, anyhow? he asked himself. Even Seth Ross, it appeared, hadn't known very much about them—no one seemed to know much about them. Old Abe Truman and his niece, according to report, had come from no one knew where three years ago and had bought the Terrible Valley ranch, a run-down property which had long stood abandoned. They had stocked the place and improved it, according to Ross' account, but had kept pretty much to themselves. "A likeable kind o' feller, old Abe Truman is," Ross had said; "for all that he's so powerful close-mouthed about hisself. He's an old hand at the cattle business, plain enough. But the girl—there ain't another like her in all California, I reckon. Prettier'n a picture an' gentle as a cooin' dove if you tread careful an' don't cross her. But when she gets mad she goes off like dynamite an' acts as amiable as a basketful o' rattlesnakes."

Such had been Ross's description and it had been quite enough to fire Brandon's naturally adventurous nature with a burning curiosity. Now, as the horse beneath him followed the windings of the lonely road up the silent valley, Brandon admitted to himself that the description was accurate. Flame's clear, clean beauty had dazzled him. The touch of her hand, where it rested upon him as she steadied herself as they rode, thrilled him oddly. Somehow, strangely, powerfully, he felt drawn to her.

But stronger than every other feeling was the sense of her bitter hostility. It chilled him. There was a hidden reason for it, he felt sure. He recalled that the girl, in her first anger, had declared him to be the "second four-flusher within two days." He wondered who the first had been, and what he had done.

Somehow, of a sudden, it seemed to Brandon that all the romantic glamor which had lured him down into this desolate region had evaporated. More than ever now he seemed to feel the grim menace of this lone, dead desert pressing upon him. He had blundered headlong, he realized, into a mystery, and it was plain that the girl resented his presence. She had not had the heart to leave him afoot on the road, but she was anxious to be rid of him. The realization galled him. Jim Brandon was the last man in the world to elbow in where he was not wanted. He determined to drop off at the first chance. He could back-track to the main highway and reach Yuma somehow. He had had enough of this ghostly desolation, already.

The trail up the wash seemed interminable. The chill of the desert night was setting in; the air was growing cold. The blaze of the stars as the darkness deepened seemed only to render blacker the grim bulk of the sierras that towered above them in jagged outline to the west; the shadows of the creosote bushes seemed denser; the mesquites, looming up darkly from the

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pale sand of the wash, appeared menacing and fantastic. Away off, along the summits of the mountains, the stars were slowly blotting out behind gathering masses of cloud; there was an intermittent flicker of lightning above the distant peaks.

The wind had increased. Already it was swirling and skoofing down from the higher slopes, whistling through the wiry-leaved bushes in sudden, mournful, chilly gusts that caught up the sand raised by the horse's plodding hoofs and flung it pattering against the cactus and dry-leaved yuccas which grew thickly among the shadowy ranks of the tall creosote bushes lining the road. The wide sandy wash had become a black sea of heaving shadows through which the pale ribbon of the trail, blurred by the wind-tossed tops of the waving bushes, seemed to twist and writhe in phantom uncertainty. And ahead, loping silently, like a white wraith through the shadows, the spectral shape of the great hound led the way onward.

The trail swung presently to the right and struck suddenly into the shadows of a gloomy tangle of tall mesquites. The wind came down the valley in clearer sweep. Brandon's senses caught the soughing rustle of tules and the damp breath of water. Underfoot, Monty's hoofs beat all at once upon a crackling crust of alkali. To the right, upon a little hillock close beside the track, gleamed something sharply white, the shape of which proclaimed it unmistakably a gravestone. As they emerged from the fringe of mesquites a hulking adobe building with blackly gaping doors and windows loomed up suddenly before them on the right of the trail.

"The old Butterfield stage station," Flame said briefly. "This is Vallecitos."

Brandon reined in the horse. "I guess I'll stop here, miss," he said.

"What!" The girl checked his movement to dismount with a sharp hand and sharper voice. "What's the idea?" she demanded. "There's no one here. This place has been deserted for years and years—don't you know that?"

"Yes, miss, but there's water hereabouts, I guess. I'll camp here to-night and back-track in the morning. There's no sense in me going farther with no chance of a job."

"That's all right, too," the girl admitted, "but you can't camp here. It's not so awful much farther up to Gus's mining claim now. You can camp in his shack. And maybe when Gus gets back to-morrow he can take you at least part of the way back. He's got spare horses and he'd do that. He knows me well enough. I'll leave a note for him."

"I reckon I can start just as well from here," Brandon said stubbornly. "I'm kinda used to taking care of myself and I don't aim to be—"

"Dammit! Sit still—and let's get moving!" There was venom this time in the way the girl checked Brandon's movement. He felt something round and hard jabbed suddenly into his back. "Just you try and get off and I'll blow the daylights out of you!" she stormed. "Monty! Get a move on!" She struck the horse with her heel so sharply that it leaped forward with a bound that almost unseated both of them. The dark bulk of the old adobe building fell back into the darkness behind them as they sped up the trail.

Of a sudden, with an unexpectedness that was startling, the girl burst out laughing. She clung to Brandon for support and choked with explosive mirth.

"I'm sorry," she sputtered presently, when she could gain her voice; "I didn't mean to get mad and stick a gun in your ribs. But you're so darn stubborn. If I wouldn't leave you on the road it's likely I'd leave you to camp at that old station—it would have been real nice of me, I'm sure. You've heard so much from Ross—didn't he tell you anything about that place?"

"Yes, miss. But I thought that maybe—"

"Well, you've got another think com-

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ing," the girl cut in. "The story about that old 'dobe is no lie, whatever else is. That old station's haunted. It's not healthy to camp there. Gee! but you made me mad for a minute. It's a wonder I didn't plug you. I'm half Irish and I've got red hair. You ought to have more sense than to be obstinate with anyone that's got a make-up like that."

Her volcanic outburst seemed to have steadied her nerves. Brandon sensed a change in her. In great measure her icy antagonism was suddenly gone. For the moment the tension of hostility vanished. Brandon's spirits rose a little. He ventured a question.

"So you reckon it's true, the yarn about Captain O'Hara still riding his big white horse around the old station, miss?"

"I don't know if it's Captain O'Hara or not," the girl answered soberly; "there's more than one opinion as to who it actually is. But Captain O'Hara *was* riding a white horse that day when the Morgan outfit ambushed and shot him. And it *is* a white horse that haunts the station—I've seen it myself. I wouldn't camp in the front room of that old building for anything. I tell you it isn't healthy to sleep there. Whenever anyone goes— Ugh!" She broke off with a little shiver.

Brandon felt a little startled. He was gripped suddenly with an eerie conviction that Flame was utterly sincere.

The whole thing gave him a queer, uncanny chill.

"Whenever anyone does sleep there they wake up scared to death and find the white horse rearing over them," she said grimly. "That front room used to be the bar in the old days. The horse comes right in through the doorway."

"It don't sound hardly possible," Brandon protested.

"No, it doesn't," the girl admitted. "But there's lots of 'impossible' things that are more than possible in a place like this. This whole valley's haunted, I think—haunted by the spirits of the dead. Lots of queer things happened here in the days when the Butterfield stage was running—gunfights and murders and hold-ups. The valley's dotted with graves, lost and hidden among the mesquites, most of 'em. Terrible Valley, where we live, to the west of here, got its name from the way the Indians used to murder every white man that strayed in there. But it's no more terrible than this main valley, I guess. If you're sensitive, you can feel things in the air here. It crushes you." A faint, involuntary shiver ran through her, and she lapsed into silence. As though unconsciously, her hands, resting against Brandon for support, tightened a little.

The pressure, slight as it was, sent a queer thrill through Brandon's veins. This was a new Flame that he had just glimpsed in the girl's sudden change of mood. For an instant the mask of will power and self-reliance had slipped aside. There had been revealed to him a girl more than a little lonely and crushed by the grimness and solitude of her environment; a lonely spirit craving companionship—a girl who was infinitely tender and human despite her fighting spirit. And he did not tell her that she was not alone in her secret dread of the valley. The omen of it hung over him also.

Following the flitting white shape of the loping hound, Monte swung aside presently into a side trail that led off to the left. They crossed the bed of the wash, threading once more through a whispering sea of low, wind-waved tules and squelching in muddy earth a moment as the track led across the seepage from the springs.

The road led up into the hills. The sandy dreariness of the wash gave place slowly to the grimmer desolation of barren rocks, piled in knolls and ridges and ghostly in the shadows with a scattering of the towering dead flower stalks of Spanish bayonet. In spite of the fact that the girl had said that the shack of Gus Weidner was not far off, it seemed to Brandon that they were a long time reaching it. The trail ap-

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peared to wind endlessly among the rocky hillocks and gullies. Glancing back a moment as they crested the summit of a long, barren ridge, Brandon was surprised to find how far they had already risen. The black gloom of the wash lay far below them, a vast lake of shadow that, in the distance—somewhere, he judged, beyond the old stage station—was broken by a tiny flare of flickering light.

The glowing light-bead held Brandon's glance an instant. It looked like a distant campfire—or perhaps it was a lighted window. A camp, or some homesteader's shack, he concluded. But he wondered that he had not noticed it when passing the stage station. It was seemingly not far from that. If it had been in existence when they had passed, it must have been screened from sight in a hollow somewhere. He wondered if Flame had noticed it.

But before he could draw her attention to it, the girl uttered an exclamation that brought Brandon's eyes back sharply to the trail in front. In the darkness at the foot of the slope, less than two hundred yards ahead of them, a lighted window glowed sharply. As they cantered down towards it, he saw the shadowy shapes of trees and the dark outlines of a shack.

"You're in luck!" Flame exclaimed with satisfaction. "This is Gus's place—and he's home. I guess he didn't go to Julian after all. Now I can explain things to him myself and I won't have to leave you there with just a note." She whistled sharply. "Gus! Ho, Gus!" she called.

The door swung open as Brandon reined the horse in before the little shack. A lean, slightly stooped figure, holding a rifle, appeared in silhouette upon the threshold. There was a sudden exclamation of astonishment.

"Why! Evenin', Miss Flame. You kinda startled me." The rifle disappeared. The old man shuffled forward.

"I thought you were in Julian, Gus," Flame said. "Uncle told me you'd be away to-day."

"That's what I told him yesterday mornin', Miss Flame, but come noon yesterday I put in a shot in the tunnel an' uncovered some likely lookin' rock. Reckon I'll stay now a coupla days till I see how it's comin'. Where you headin' for this hour o' night?"

Flame explained the situation briefly. Old Gus's deep-set steely eyes ran over Brandon—a deliberate, appraising scrutiny that seemed to satisfy him.

"You couldn't have brought him to no better place," he declared heartily. "Come right on in. There's coffee on the stove an' th' finest pot o' beans you ever seen. I just brought up a fresh bucket o' water from th' spring—you'll prob'ly 'preciate that. An' I reckon I can fix you up all right with a bunk, pardner. Come on in. An', Miss Flame, you better have a cup o' coffee, too, afore you start home. It won't take but a minute."

CHAPTER V

"Hoss Thieves an' Chinamen"

IN Gus's tiny cabin, lit by the glow of a flickering oil lamp and warmed by the almost stifling heat of a wood-crammed cook stove, Brandon got his second good look at Flame. As he quenched the fag-ends of his thirst with spring water and hungrily attacked the steaming plate of beans that had been set before him, his eyes followed her, fascinated.

A trifle to his surprise, though greatly to his satisfaction, she had accepted old Gus Weidner's offer of the coffee. It would probably be the last time that he would ever see Flame, Brandon reflected dismally, and he wanted at least to see all he could of her.

Somehow, in the last mile or two of their ride, since she had dropped for a space the hard, almost savage, mask of speech and action and given him a glimpse of her real self, his heart had gone out to her with a queer sense of tenderness—something different, deeper and more gripping than the luring glamor of curiosity with which her

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strange name and Ross's description had first filled him. Brandon was conscious now of a curious, uncomfortable feeling; he was aware suddenly that he was sad and dejected. Mysteriously, in as short a time as he had known her, this girl with the clear blue eyes and hair of golden flame had gripped his heart as no other girl had ever done. And he would probably never see her again. She had made it plain that she wished to get rid of him. Life seemed to Brandon suddenly unutterably bleak and lonely.

And, studying the girl as she sat by the little board table waiting while old Gus rustled the coffee, it seemed to Brandon that, for all her will power and self-reliance, Flame at that moment was more than a little lonely—and scared—herself. The conviction came to him that it was for this reason that she had accepted the offer of the coffee before going on. There was a sense of strain and fear about her which she did her best to conceal. Her eyes were restless and her face was drawn with anxiety. He noticed that two buttons of her khaki shirt were open, and an instant later he realized why. The cloth of the shirt bulged suspiciously beneath her left armpit. It was there that she wore her gun in a shoulder holster. It was not by any accident that those two buttons were left unfastened. And it had not been lost upon him that, in her explanations to Gus, Flame had carefuly avoided making any mention whatever of the opened graves.

Old Gus was moving pots about on the stove and shoving more wood into its already overheated fire box. He paused a moment to glance over his shoulder with an abrupt remark:

"You might tell your uncle he better keep an eye on that Mex you got workin' for you, Miss Flame. That hombre ain't no good."

Flame sprang to her feet.

"Did he go past here?" she exclaimed excitedly, "did you see him? He's not working for us! He's a horse thief! He's stolen Wings, the thoroughbred!"

"The hell you say!" A chunk of firewood still in his hand, Gus straightened round in open-mouthed consternation.

"But he did!" Flame cried breathlessly, her uneasiness for the moment forgotten. "That's where I've been today—way down to Davidson's at Smoky Springs, looking for him."

"Well, I'll be damned! If only I'd 'a' knowed it!" Gus was still struggling with his astonishment. "How come, Miss Flame, that he got hold o' the hoss?"

"That Mexican four-flusher turned up at the ranch last night," Flame explained heatedly. "He said he was walking to Julian and he'd tried to save time by using the old trail—you know, the old washed-out one that runs past our place and cuts through to Banner. He said he'd somehow lost his way back in the hills and had been all day without water. We fixed him up and gave him a meal and a bed in the barn. Daybreak this morning he was gone—and Wings, too. The trail's stony around our place, you know, and we couldn't be sure of the tracks. We didn't know which way he'd gone. So uncle went up the old Banner road and I came down this way. And you say you saw him?"

Gus nodded. "I had th' cuss right under my hand," he said regretfully, "an' I let him go, not knowin' anythin' was wrong. Y'see, it was this way. Just a bit after daybreak I seen a feller come gallopin' over the rise, comin' down th' trail from your way. I could tell it weren't you nor your uncle, but I rec'nized that little bay thoroughbred o' yourn by his action. I suspicioned somethin' was wrong, so I run inta th' shack an' got the thirty-thirty, an' slipped out an' hid behind that big cottonwood where the trail crosses th' crick between them two short lines o' fence. Well, in a minute or so, here comes this feller a tearin' an' I seen then that he was a Mexican, so I steps out an' hollered an' throwed down on

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him with th' rifle. He stopped pronto, all right—almost atop o' me. "Where yuh goin' with that hoss?" I says.

"Well, sir, Miss Flame, that greaser was a cool hand. He jest grinned—which didn't help his looks much, account o' that old scar that runs clear across his cheek—an' reaches in his pocket an' pulls out a letter. 'I get job Truman ranch yesterday,' he says. 'Señorita send me with this an' say to hurry. You think I steal *caballo*—no?' An' he grins some more.

"Well, Miss Flame, I squinted at th' envelope an' I rec'nized your writin' all right. An' when I seen that it was addressed t' young Ted Davidson, well I nach'rally thought—"

Flame's amazed exclamation cut him short. "Why—the dirty thief!" she exploded angrily. "I wrote that letter in the kitchen last night, while he was eating his supper at the other end of the room. I got through before he finished, and I sealed it and stuck it up on the shelf behind the clock. I was going to get Tom Hadden to take it down to Davidson's next time he went past our way. Then I went out of the room for a minute—that sneaking coyote must have taken it then. This morning, in the excitement, I forgot all about it and didn't notice it was gone—It was a letter Uncle wanted me to write to Ted Davidson about some cattle he was going to buy." There was a trace of confusion in her voice as she added this last bit of unnecessary information. Glancing at her, Brandon sensed that her embarrassment and the sudden rush of color to her cheeks was due to something else besides anger.

"Oh, o' course, I don't know what was in it!" old Gus hastened to assure her. "But I knowed th' letter was genuine enough an' th' hombre's yarn sounded square an' honest. Nach'rally, bein' a born fool, I let him go."

Flame clenched her hands and stamped her foot in impotent vexation. "Oh, if you'd only known! But it wasn't your fault, Gus, that you let him by. Anyone would have been fooled by a bluff like that. I wonder where he went. It wasn't long after daybreak that I lit out after him. He couldn't have had much start."

"You didn't come this road, did you, Miss Flame? I never seen you go past."

"No," the girl said bitterly, "like a fool, I didn't come past here. I was sure you weren't home anyhow, so I turned off just behind the rise and took that old cut-off trail that strikes across the west end of your horse pasture. I was so dead certain that he'd got a good start and that he'd naturally go in the direction of Smoky Springs that I thought my only chance was to get in ahead of him somehow. That short cut saves a lot of distance."

"It do, but it's hell t' travel. I reckon you had a rough trip." There was a glint of honest admiration in the old man's eyes.

"I sure did! You'll notice I didn't come back that way," Flame said dryly. "But after all I lost him somewhere. He didn't go past Smoky Springs at all. Old man Davidson and Ted were away in Brawley and there was only Ma Davidson and old Joe at the ranch. But they were both certain that no one had gone past. The trail goes right by their house, you know. No one could have got by without their knowing it."

"That's plumb peculiar," ruminated Gus. "Th' greaser musta doubled back towards Mason Valley or somewheres."

"I guess he must have," Flame agreed wearily. "Anyway, there wasn't a thing I could do at Smoky Springs. Ma Davidson said she'd send old Joe right off to notify Bill Watson, the deputy, and that she'd have old man Davidson and Ted come up here to help us search as soon as they get home, which'll be either to-night or to-morrow. So I came back. I wasted a lot of time searching side canyons on the way, but I'd told Uncle that maybe I'd stay at Davidson's to-night, so I took my time—I knew he wouldn't be worrying if it got late and I didn't come back. But there wasn't a trace of that

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Mexican anywhere—he's just vanished. I guess, though, the officers will pick him up somewhere. I've given his description, scar and all, and Wings is too conspicuous a horse for anyone to hide out long." Her voice held a forced note of hopefulness.

Old Gus shook his head.

"I dunno," he said dubiously. "I hate t' sp'ile your hopes, Miss Flame, but I reckon your chances o' seein' Wings again, is slim. I'll tell you why. When I seen that greaser this mornin' I kinda thought his face looked familiar. But I couldn't place it. But a coupla hours after he'd gone by, it come back to me in a flash. That Mex is Pedro Martinez—that's why I started in to warn you agin him."

"Who?" Flame eyed the old man inquiringly.

"No, you wouldn't ha' heard o 'him, o' course, seein' as you ain't lived in these parts more'n three years. But he's one o' Slant Galloway's men an', moreover, he comes o' a bad stock. His grandfather used t' be hoss wrangler at the old stage station down here—he was workin' there the time the Morgans tried t' hold up th' stage. He never had no flatterin' reputation, so I've heared tell."

Flame's eyes widened with a sudden, startled look. But she shook her head. "I've never heard of Slant Galloway, either."

"You would have, if you'd lived across th' Border any,"—Gus shrugged and shoved the chunk of wood he had been holding into the stove— "Galloway's a high light in th' gamblin' an' smugglin' society down in Baja California. He's a no-good crook. He was Jake Templeton's main lootenant in th' Chink smugglin' business, years ago. You've heard o' Jake Templeton, maybe? He was th' smugglin' king they used t' call 'Red Beard' account o' his face bein' smothered in a brush o' red whiskers. I never had th' luck t' see Jake myself, but I've heared aplenty. He had to skip out fer parts unknown about nine years ago, account o' th' Chinese secret societies gettin' sore at him fer somethin' he done."

As he talked the old man had been fumbling in a rough little wall-cupboard, producing three chipped and ancient cups and saucers—his cherished "company china"—which he set out on the table. The sudden whitening of Flame's face at his words passed him unnoticed.

But Brandon was startled. All at once the girl had gone pale as death. The momentary excitement which had held her as she spoke of the horse thief was wiped out utterly. All of her previous uneasiness and fear, which for the moment she had apparently forgotten, seemed to have returned upon her, and with tenfold intensity. Her lips had gone white. Her hand, resting against the table, clutched the edge of the rough boards for support.

Gus was punching a hole in the top of a can of condensed milk.

"An' that's why, since I rec'nized that Dago what stole Wings, I kinda think you ain't got much chance o' gettin' th' hoss back, Miss Flame. He'll be across th' Border into Mexico afore th' officers even get started."

He reached for the coffee pot. "I hope this here coffee ain't too strong fer you, Miss Flame," he said, as he started to fill her cup.

The girl shook her head. Watching her face, his eyes held with a strange, compelling fascination, it seemed to Brandon that the action was automatic —that she had not really heard the question. She had subsided in her seat once more but her eyes were full of the vacant light of some inner fear. The fingers of her hand that lay upon the table were twisting nervously.

"It's kinda queer, too, that Pedro Martinez is roamin' round these parts again," Gus ruminated garrulously as he methodically filled each cup with the boiling, coal-black, molasses-thick coffee. "Mebbe he's got a hunch where the O'Hara gold is cached. Might be. From what I've heared there was always a suspicionment that his grand-

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father and Si Slade, who used t' be station tender at that time, knowed more'n they told about th' murder o' Captain O'Hara. But if they did no one ever found out nothin', because they was both killed theirselves in a gamblin' row th' day after th' Morgans was wiped out. So there ain't no knowin' where that cache o' gold or th' mine is. Lot's o' people has looked for it. I've heard rumors that even Jake Templeton hisself come up once from Lower California an' tried t' find it. But I reckon that's jest a yarn—I never met no one that actually seen him up here. But if he was, he never found nothin'. Th' gold won't never be discovered, I reckon. But th' ghost o' th' old cap'n gets uneasy over it every once in a while. Th' last month he's been ridin' round th' old station pretty regular. I seen him three different times—ridin' through th' mesquites at night—plain as I see you settin' here."

He set the coffee pot back on the stove and stooped to get more firewood.

Opposite each other across the rough little table made from the sides of packing cases, Brandon and Flame sat silent. Brandon drank his coffee and finished the last of his beans. Absorbed as he was in watching the face of the girl before him, he had not paid particular attention to Gus's remarks. They did not seem to him especially important, and most of the facts concerning the lost O'Hara mine he had heard before from the lips of Seth Ross. But what gripped and startled him was the change that had come over Flame; the way in which—utterly unnoticed by old Gus—her agitation had seemed to increase with every word. White as a sheet she sat now, staring at Brandon with unseeing eyes and mechanically sipping at her steaming coffee, apparently utterly unconscious of the fact that her hand was shaking so violently that she could hardly hold the cup to her lips. Outside, the wind, tearing in sudden gusts down the creek, snored through the cottonwoods. There was the sound of old Gus grubbing around in the wood-box. The fire-door of the stove clanged. Midnight, his huge length stretched out on the warm floor, lifted his head and whined uneasily.

"All right, dawg," said Gus tolerantly, stooping to pat the big brute's head, "I got somethin' fer you, too. There's a beef bone here you can have."

He opened a wire-screened box that hung on the wall and felt about in its interior. "Reckon I'll have t' buy Midnight offen you, Miss Flame, an' keep him here t' pertect me if traffic on this road keeps up like t'-day," he said jokingly. "Hoss thieves passin' in th' mornin' an' a ottermobile load o' Chinamen in th' afternoon!"

There was a sudden crash. Brandon jumped. Meat bone in hand, Gus wheeled round, startled. Midnight was on his feet, bristling—the cup of coffee had slipped from Flame's fingers and shivered to pieces on the floor. The girl had risen from her chair. She was standing with clenched hands, the spilled coffee widening in a dark stain over the rough floor boards at her feet.

"W-why, Miss Flame!"

"I—I'm sorry—my coffee burned me!" the girl gasped, cutting short the old man's surprised stammer. She stooped and made a pretense of collecting the shattered fragments of the cup. "W-what was that you said about Chinamen?" she asked faintly.

"Them?—Oh, that didn't amount t' nothin' "—the old man's startled surprise subsided—"just a car crammed full o' Chinks that went by here late this afternoon—some more smugglin', I guess, from th' look o' their car. It was a big one with a extry reserve tank o' gas on behind. They was headed up your way—mebbe they think they kin dodge th' officers by travelin' that old road t' Banner that goes by your place. Or mebbe they got a system o' scatterin' into th' canyons and crossin' th' mountains on foot. Tom Hadden told me he seen a lone Chink sneakin' in a gully this side o' your place a ways. 'Tain't none o' our business, anyhow, I

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reckon. Lemme give you some more coffee, Miss Flame. You're white as a sheet. You got burnt pretty bad, I reckon. I got another chiney cup up here an' I'll kinda cool it off for you this time." He reached toward his cupboard.

"No—no, I've had plenty!" the girl gasped. She drew her breath sharply. Brandon could see that she was fighting to control herself. "I've got to go now. I—I shouldn't have stayed at all. I'm late and—"

She caught her breath again and pushed her chair aside. "Thanks for the coffee, Gus—and I'll see you tomorrow. Good night, Mr. Brandon. Come on, Midnight!" She started hastily towards the door.

"Hold on! Hold on jest a minute! I gotta give you a spec'men o' that new rock from th' tunnel—I want your uncle t' see it! Hold on a minute. I got a piece all ready. It's settin' out back!"

Old Gus blundered away. There was the sound of the back door opening and banging windily shut as he went out.

Brandon snatched the opportunity afforded by the old man's absence. He touched the girl's arm.

"Miss Flame," he blurted impulsively, "I—I don't want to butt in or anything, and it's none of my business, of course. But there's something wrong—I can see that with half an eye—and I'd sure like to help you if I can. You hadn't ought to go home alone like this, worried an' upset like you're feeling. You better let me go up with you tonight. I can come back here first thing in the morning and—"

He broke off hurriedly, checked both by the sound of Gus's returning footsteps and by the quick leap of suspicious hostility in the girl's eyes—a flash of distrust that, of a sudden, died and was succeeded by something very like gratitude.

"Here's th' spec'men—an' it's a dandy! Ef you hold it up t' th' light—"

Flame snatched the bit of rock from the old man's fingers and thrust it into her shirt pocket, cutting short his explanations. "Gus," she said hurriedly, "I've changed my mind. I'm going to take Mr. Brandon up to the ranch with me to-night. He'll be able to help us hunt for Wings for a day or so. Can you lend him a horse to ride up on?"

"Sure—sure!" Obviously astonished but evidently used to Flame's sudden changes of plan, the old man nodded vigorously. "There's th' buckskin in th' corral out back—o' course he's the poorest o' th' three. Ef you'd set an' wait 'bout half an hour I'll walk up t' th' pasture an' get one o' th' others. The white an' th' pinto's up there. Either o' them would be better'n—"

"The buckskin's all right," Flame interrupted hastily, moving towards the door. "We'll help you saddle him—I guess we'll have to borrow your spare saddle, too, Gus."

She pushed open the door, stepped out into the windy darkness and darted away into the shadows, Midnight and Brandon at her heels and the slightly astonished Gus bringing up the rear. "Let's hurry!" the girl cried breathlessly; "it's cold and I'm tired! Let's hurry! I've got to get home!"

But as he followed her to the gloom-shrouded little corral beneath the cottonwood trees, Brandon knew that it was neither cold nor weariness that was responsible for her suddenly chattering teeth and for the trembling nervousness that had laid hold of her.

CHAPTER VI

The Tong Strikes

TO Brandon it seemed that the few moments needed to saddle the little buckskin horse passed in a blurred scramble of frantic haste. Almost before he knew it, the little shack and the breathless Gus were behind them and he found himself galloping madly into the night at the heels of this strange girl whose goading, unnamed fear had suddenly become his own.

For, in spite of himself, and why he could not have told, Brandon was con-

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scious of the crushing, chilling fear of some unknown, deadly peril; a fear so real and poignant that, for the time, it seemed to have banished the last traces of his fatigue. His nerves were tingling with a strange, uncanny sense of impending disaster. The night seemed darker; the raw, gusting wind, swooping down upon them as their hard-pressed horses clattered round the winding turns of the rough mountain trail, had a grimmer and more ominous snarl to it.

The night *was* darker. Glancing up Brandon saw that the cloud rampart along the summits of the sierras was spreading—a ragged scud was driving eastward and forming a swiftly thickening canopy overhead. Already half the stars were blotted and the black shadows of the mountains into which the galloping girl and the pale, loping hound ahead were leading him were stygian and impenetrable. He had been on the point of asking Gus for the loan of a gun before he left the shack, but he had checked himself. In face of the fact that Flame had been careful to conceal her fears from Gus, the request would have seemed queer and suspicious.

The trail writhed and twisted maddeningly as they pushed into the hills. A straight line could have covered the distance in a fraction of the time, Brandon realized. But apparently anything like a straight trail that horses could travel was out of the question in this rocky country.

They rode without speaking, in a silence broken only by the clattering hoofs of the galloping horses and the snarling whistle of the wind. Indeed, even had Flame been in the mood to speak, speech, except in loud shouts, would have been out of the question, for, as Brandon soon discovered, Gus's little buckskin pony was no match for Monty. It was only constant urging that kept him laboring in the wake of the speeding horse in front.

At length, rounding the steep shoulder of a hill, Flame reined to a halt. As he forged up alongside of her and checked his panting mount, Brandon saw that ahead the country fell away into a lake of inky darkness that was evidently a little hill-walled valley. In the distance, on the valley floor, a glowing point of light shone up through the blackness.

"That's the ranch," Flame's voice was breathless with mingled dread and hope as she pointed; "someone's there. Uncle must be home. Or—or—"

Her words died in her throat. She jerked her horse back with a sudden involuntary cry of terror. "Look!" she gasped, "look! Oh, my God!—we're too late!"

But Brandon had not needed her choking cry nor the sudden clutch of her hand upon his arm. He had already seen—and the thing that had happened had brought him erect in his saddle with a galvanic jerk.

The light in the valley had gone! Of a sudden, before his eyes, it had winked out with startling abruptness. But, as it vanished, the black darkness that blotted it was pricked with a half dozen scattered and momentary flashes, sudden and transitory as the snapping gleams of monster fireflies. Faintly to his ears in a lull of the wind, came the unmistakable *crack! crack!* of distant shots.

"They've killed him! Oh, God—they've killed him!" The cry broke from the girl in a strangling, half-articulate sob. From a split second of stunned horror she woke suddenly to furious action. As though fired with a gust of blind fury she leaned forward and struck spurs to her horse. Before Brandon could lift a finger to prevent her, she had shot away and, at break-neck speed, was tearing madly down the trail into the valley.

Brandon whirled in pursuit, his startled surprise blotted in sudden apprehension as he realized the girl's mad purpose. What had happened in the valley below them he could only guess—but he needed no guess as to what would surely come to pass if Flame's

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furious, grief-blinded charge could not be halted. His blood went suddenly cold. He hurtled down the steep trail at breakneck speed, urging the winded buckskin with merciless desperation.

And somehow, lifted almost, it seemed to Brandon, by the sheer force of his own frenzy, his tired, gasping little pony achieved the impossible. At the foot of the long slope his stretching muzzle reached Monty's flank—passed it. As the two horses raced neck and neck across the clattering stones of the wash, Brandon reached out and clutched the girl's bridle reins with an iron grip.

"Flame! you're mad! Where are you going?" Above the smashing beat of the hoofs and the rush of the wind, his voice was a shout. He dragged both horses to a sliding halt, side by side.

"Let go those reins! Let me go!" The girl beat at him with her fist and struggled furiously to break his grip of the leathers. "Let me go!" she cried hysterically. "Let me go this minute or I'll—"

"No, you won't!" With a lightning-like movement Brandon released his own bridle reins and pinioned both her hands in his. "You won't do anything of the sort!" he said sternly. "Listen, Flame, I don't know what's just happened down there, but I do know that I'm not going to let you ride down like this and be murdered. I'm going to stop you—if I have to fight you and your dog both."

The girl gasped. As though the harsh determination in his voice had startled her and broken the spell of blind madness she seemed of a sudden to go limp. He felt the steel spring tension of her muscles relax.

"I—I guess you're right," she stammered huskily; "I was crazy to act that way. But I must go—I must go on and find out what's happened. Maybe he's still alive—maybe they've got him prisoner. Don't you see I must go—I *must!* We're wasting time! If you won't come I—Oh, God!" Her voice broke in a pitiful sob.

"I'd come with you to hell, girl," Brandon said impulsively; "I stopped you so you wouldn't commit suicide, that's all—you couldn't have done any good to anyone, heading in like you were."

He released her hands. "Who are they, anyhow?" he demanded. "What are we up against?"

"The Tong—it's the Tong!" Her voice came in a chattering gasp.

"The Tong?" For a moment the significance of the word was lost on him.

"Yes—yes!" the girl panted. "The Yellow Dragon Tong from San Francisco. For nine years they've—"

Realization broke suddenly upon Brandon. "You mean those Chinks that Gus said he saw this afternoon?" he cut in sharply. "You mean they were—?"

"They were Tong gunmen!" she choked breathlessly. "Oh, I did hope that Gus was right—that they were just smugglers. But they aren't; they're the Tong. Oh, hurry! for heavens sake hurry! If they've taken him alive they'll—"

She twisted her hands in an agony of horror and did not finish the sentence. But there was no need. Brandon jerked upright in his saddle, tensed with purpose.

"I reckon we'll hurry," he said, his voice of a sudden hard with grim understanding. "How far's the house from here?"

"About a mile—straight down this trail."

Brandon listened an instant, straining his ears. No sound came to him from the blackness in front, save the gusting moan of the rising wind. The pall of darkness was unbroken.

"Come on then," he said. "You better let me go ahead—I've scouted before. Go easy now—if they see us first we won't have a chance. And there's only your gun between the two of us. Where's the dog?"

"He's gone on in front somewhere."

"That's bad—he's too easy to see. If they spot him they'll be on the look-

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out. But we can't help it now. Come on!"

He touched his panting horse and moved off into the darkness, the girl following obediently at his heels.

As swiftly as he dared, Brandon led the way forward. The trail was stony and the hoofs of the horses beat upon it with a clatter that was dangerously loud in spite of the muffling rush of the wind. Brandon's every sense was strained into the night ahead. Only too well he realized the foolhardy thing they were doing in venturing thus blindly into what was probably a nest of waiting gunmen. But there seemed no other course. The girl was right; they could not retreat before they had at least attempted to discover what had occurred. Outside of old Gus Weidner there was no chance of securing help. And, even if they were to waste the precious time necessary to ride back and get him, his presence would not materially alter the hopeless odds against them. No, there was nothing for it but to go forward and find out for themselves what had happened. And if it should turn out as the girl seemed to fear, that Abe Truman had been taken prisoner—

Brandon snapped off his speculations on this point abruptly, conscious that some of the chilling horror that had filled Flame had transferred itself to him also. Vaguely all the disconnected scraps and hints that had been accumulating in his mind began to arrange themselves, fitting together in a sort of mosaic. The pattern of it seemed hopelessly tangled as yet, but he was beginning to have a glimmering suspicion. He found himself all at once hoping fervently that Abe Truman had *not* been taken alive.

Eyes and ears keyed to the limit, Brandon picked his way ahead. The windy blackness seemed to mock him; there was something vast and uncanny in its apparent emptiness. Almost he began to doubt his senses—to doubt that the lighted window and those ominous gun flashes had ever been anything other than imagination. Why was there now no gleam of light anywhere? Where had the attackers gone?

The soughing whip of wind-tossed branches and a blacker mass of shadow blotting up suddenly at his left, told Brandon that he was skirting a dense clump of large mesquite trees. Flame urged her horse up beside his.

"The house is just beyond this clump," she whispered. "It's on bare, open ground, right at the edge of the canyon. This is the last shelter. We'd better tie our horses here."

Without waiting for his answer, she swung silently from her saddle and led her mount cautiously into the denser obscurity.

Brandon followed her example. There was wisdom in the girl's suggestion. If the ground about the house was bare of cover, then their only chance was to make their way stealthily forward on foot.

Silently, working by the sense of touch alone, they tied their horses to stout branches of the swaying trees. The blackness in the mesquite clump was impenetrable and almost everywhere the waving branches were too low to walk under. Except for the wiry whistle of the wind and the scrape and thresh of the trees there was nothing to be heard.

Brandon reached out and found the girl.

"How wide's this clump?" he whispered.

"Not so very—only a few yards,"—her lips were pressed close to his ear, "—and the house is about thirty yards beyond the edge of it. This way—" She faced him in the right direction with her hands.

"Come on then," he whispered. "Keep close behind me."

He dropped on his hands and knees and crept swiftly forward under the thorny tangle. It was black here, black as the inside of a coal mine and, in spite of the wind above, it seemed strangely silent. Suddenly, and without warning, out of the darkness at his

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side, something cold and damp reached out and thrust against Brandon's cheek. As he jerked back, stifling a startled cry, a great dim shape of white materialized silently from the gloom, snuffed at him with tolerant acceptance and slipped past towards Flame. With a throb of unspeakable relief Brandon realized that it was Midnight. But his hand, brushing over the huge white form as it passed, told him that the dog's hair was bristling.

Brandon resumed his crawling advance through the low, trailing branches. From the stealthy movements behind him he could tell that both Flame and the dog were following him closely; he caught the sound of the girl's guarded whispers and Midnight's gusty sniffing. This sudden reappearance of the big hound puzzled Brandon; he did not know what interpretation to place upon it. But the dog's bristling tenseness was ominous.

Above the soughing whistle of the trees a new sound came all at once to Brandon's ears—the creak and slam of an unlatched door swinging backwards and forwards in the wind. He found himself suddenly at the outer fringe of the mesquites. The wind gusted savagely down and whipped the thorny branches against his face. Straight ahead of him, looming up blackly in the gloom of the night, he saw the house.

In the belt of inky shadow beneath the outer trees Brandon crouched listening, Flame and the quivering dog at his side. The rushing gusts of the wind and the beat of the branches seemed to fill the night with a lifeless emptiness. Rayless and desolate, the dim bulk of the ranch house hulked before them. The unfastened door creaked and banged mournfully with a hollow, empty sound. The place seemed utterly deserted.

"They've gone," Brandon whispered. "Wait here. I'll make sure."

"Not that way!" The girl checked him as he moved. "Keep away to the right and go round the corral."

Before he could stop her, she had slipped from the cover of the trees and, pistol in hand, was leading the way.

He followed her swiftly. Together, the big dog slinking warily beside them, they picked their steps stealthily across a bare, stony space. The shadowy, uneven posts of a small corral loomed suddenly out of the dark. Brandon stumbled all at once and fell sprawling upon something large and hairy. His hand struck in a little puddle of sticky wetness, a puddle that was still faintly warm. He heard the dry scrape of leathers. Flame uttered a faint, gasping cry.

"My God! It's Wings—and dead!"

"How do you know?" Brandon's hands were already traveling in swift exploration over the prone body of the still saddled horse.

"By the saddle," the girl whispered; "this is the saddle that Mexican stole this morning. Besides, I know Wings by the feel of him—by the feel of his head and mane. How did he get here outside the corral like this? And why?

"Wait!" She darted towards the fence.

Brandon sprang after her. But almost before he had realized where she had gone the girl reappeared, slipping out like a shadow from between the rails of the gate.

"They've killed Uncle's horse, too!" she whispered breathlessly.

Brandon caught her arm.

"You stay here!" he commanded in a tense whisper, "I'm going across to the house. Give me your flashlight."

"I won't!" Despite her fear-chattering teeth, there was stubborn defiance in the girl's voice. "I'm going with you. There's no one there now. And if there is—"

She left the words unfinished. "Come on!" she breathed suddenly.

With a swift movement, the girl wrenched herself free of his grasp and, with Midnight at her heels, darted recklessly through the windy shadows towards the dark shadow of the house.

(To be continued in the next issue.)

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How About the Girl?

By Clark Welch

He didn't take her to the fiesta. He didn't notice her new dress. He forgot that little purple flowers grew on the range. It sure looked as though they'd pretty nearly lost each other, but then they called a new deal in the game of love.

"BUT, Gail, that's not what you said!"

"It's what I'm saying now."

"You told me—"

"I've changed my mind."

"Why, you promised that by the time the spring round-up was over, and I made the last payment on the ranch I'm buying for us, you'd let me get the license and the minister. If it's not going to be this fall, when will you marry me?" Bruce McKay's gray eyes clouded with puzzled surprise. His lean young shoulders tensed under his flannel shirt.

Gail Verity put her two hands on his shoulders and pushed herself out of his arms. She did not answer at once, but gazed off at the distant mesa with its high rimrocks outlined against the deep blue of the sky. There was a defiant tilt to her russet-crowned head. When she did speak, her words, though seemingly irrelevant, came with studied deliberation.

"Did you notice if the pentstemon had come into bloom as you drifted the cattle by the upper springs?"

"You mean them purple weeds you were talking about this morning—or were they yellow? Well, to tell you the truth, I didn't notice, Gail. I was anxious about finding that bunch of heifers your dad said had headed that way. And I wanted to ride back by the dam and see how the work there was coming on. Lafe More said the whole Mexican population of the valley was up looking at the big fill we're making. The Mexicans don't like to see that dam going in. When this country is green with alfalfa, folks will fence their land and the greasers will have to find some place else to run their stock. But, Gail, you and me—" His thoughts bridged back to her broken promise and he tried to take her hand.

"I asked you to look for the pentstemon. Did you know I went to the dance last night with Dan Baker?" She shoved her hands deep into the pockets of her sweater, flippantly tossed her head and drew her lips to a rebellious line as he frowned and caught up her words.

"With Dan Baker?"

"Yes, of course. I was all dressed

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and ready to go when you sent word you couldn't take me because," her voice lifted with resentment, "you wanted to talk beef prices with some buyers from Denver. The buyers came over this morning to talk to Dad; they're going to be down here for three or four days."

"I didn't know they were staying over." Bruce McKay was not apologizing, he was simply stating a fact. Then his frown deepened. "I don't like you to be running around with Dan Baker. Of course I'm glad you didn't miss the dance if you wanted to go. I'm not saying anything against Dan, either. Dan's all right in his way but he drinks more than is good for him and he don't know what responsibility is. If anything should happen, there's no telling what he might do. Did you say you wanted to go somewheres to-morrow evening, to another dance, or was it a basket social at the schoolhouse? I'll take you, Gail. I'll take you wherever you want to go. Don't be riding over these hills with Dan Baker."

"But you promised to take me to the dance last night and into Cabezos on Tuesday and you didn't do either. Dan was lovely to me. He borrowed Lafe More's car and we had a wonderful ride to the dance and back. I haven't had such a good time all summer. He likes to dance with me. He likes the way I dress, he says, and the way I look."

"I've heard Dan talk that fool way to girls before. He'd better be 'tending to his ranch or he's liable to lose it by the time we get the water down here."

"So, you think it was foolish of Dan to say nice things to me. You, who haven't noticed—Oh, Bruce, did you notice that I have on a new dress? I sewed all morning so that I could wear it just to please you. And you will take me to the social to-morrow, won't you?" Wistfulness broke through her resentment. She was at his side again.

He smoothed her wind-tossed hair and smiled into her brown eyes; then surveyed the soft folds of green that enhanced the white transparency of her skin. "Sure, I'll take you, Gail. You're my girl." His arms circled to hold her. "I can't say I noticed the dress, though. You always look nice to—"

His arms closed about empty air. The girl was flying down the path toward the ranch house.

When Gail reached her own room she snatched off the green dress and threw it across the chair; then flung her slim young body on the bed, buried her face in a pillow and wept. Bruce McKay didn't love her—he couldn't. It was better to break off with him before it was too late. They had nothing in common—nothing. She had fought against the realization, but it had been forced upon her. Why, only this morning, when she had said what a glorious day it was and how sharp the jagged mountains cut into the sky, he had answered that it was hard weather for the cattle business; not enough moisture for the spring of the year.

He thought of nothing but cattle or ranches or water or dams or ditches! The lovely things of life never touched him. The tall spikes of pentstemon were only weeds. He had even forgotten to notice if it was blooming, and she had asked him to notice. And the new dress, and the dance last night. He never wanted to take her anywhere. When they were married it would be even worse. He would expect her to turn at once into a staid, hard-working rancher's wife. Always at home, cooking for the hay hands or a round-up crew. In the winter, sewing, mending through the long evenings while he buried his head in the stockmen's papers. No dances, no gay little pleasure trips to town, no fun. Not even an appreciation of the beauty all around them. She couldn't stand a life like that. It might be all right for a man, but what about a girl? Not

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for her! She'd stick to what she'd said; end things now and forget him. She gave the pillow a rebellious punch and burst into a more violent flood of tears.

By the time old Juliana, the Mexican cook, called her to supper, Gail had straightened out her thoughts. She leaned over to kiss her father on the bald spot that he insisted was worn smooth by her kisses. She pulled her chair up to the table with a flourish.

But she had not been able to eradicate all traces of her tears. Her father eyed her over his glasses speculatively. "I saw Bruce McKay ride in this afternoon. I suppose you told him you were out with Dan Baker last night." He ventured a guess at the cause of her troubled face.

"Yes." Her eyes were measuring the coffee as she poured it into his cup.

"Bruce is as fine as they're made," her father went on. "We'd never have gotten this dam proposition put through if it hadn't been for him. I'm glad you picked out a man like Bruce; he's the kind to make a good husband for a woman, and he's the best judge of cattle in the state. Everybody raising beef 'round here, takes his opinion for gospel, and when it comes to picking out horses—"

"There are other things in the world besides live stock!" Gail tossed her head and her red curls glowed in the soft candle light, a defiant banner.

"Yes, there's other things, but Bruce is in the ranching business and he sticks to his line. Now take this dam, for instance. Bruce has—"

Gail listened in respectful silence while her father enumerated a complete list of Bruce McKay's virtues, but the food on her plate remained untasted. At last she excused herself; she couldn't stand any more. She left her father and went out into the cool evening air. A soft breeze, carrying the scent of lilacs, drifted around her; a nighthawk circled high against a darkening sky. It was on just such a night as this that Bruce had told her that he loved her. They had planned to be so happy all their lives together. Perhaps, after all, she was being unfair to him. He was wonderful, as her father had said. But then, so is a grain separator wonderful, but who'd want to be married to one?

Still, there was the social to-morrow evening; he had promised to take her. She could keep away from the subject of their marriage. He might be made to understand after all, if he saw how happy she was and what a good time they could have together. She loved him; she would try to make him see. Her heart gave a little throb as it always did when she remembered how she loved him. Yes, she would give him another chance—to-morrow. But that was the last. She would know then.

The next evening Gail stood on the porch and looked anxiously down the road for her father. He had been gone since morning. He was never away from the house at meal time; she could not understand what was keeping him.

At last she answered Juliana's persistent calls and went in to eat alone. The supper was almost spoiled with waiting, but Juliana was not only worried about the *pollo* and *arroz*, she was fretting to get the meal over and the dishes cleared away. She wanted to get to the baile in good time, she explained to Gail.

"All the Mexicans, even Juan Garcin's cousin, from across Rio Plateado, are to be there. And the prizes—*Madre de Dios*, such prizes for the best dancing! My poor little Beatriz, who threw herself away on that worthless Juan Garcin, did not think to compete, but Juan consented to let her dance when I offered to buy the new slippers. Ah, but Beatriz, she will show them. You should see her whirl in the *danza* and shake the *castañeta*. But it will be late when the dance is over, señorita. I can not come back to-night, but to-morrow early. I will spend the night at the house of

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Beatriz. She lives but a throw of the stone from the dance hall. Your father will be here soon. The Señor McKay is coming; you will not be afraid?" Juliana prattled on as Gail ate.

The girl did not linger at the table. Bruce McKay was coming early to take her to the schoolhouse. She must have plenty of time to dress; look her very best, for this was to be the test. If she failed now— But she would not fail, she must not, she warned herself and brushed her shimmering hair for the twentieth time, smoothed her silken bodice, twisted her bouffant skirt into place and quirked her head from side to side until a perky little rose was pinned at exactly the right angle on her shoulder. Then she went to the porch and stared into the night.

A swollen red moon was bulging over the horizon. She sank into a chair to watch the road that showed faintly in its eerie light and listen for the car that Bruce would bring to take her to the schoolhouse. The moon hung for a long moment over the mesa, then started to climb the sky and grow small and silvery, as though the effort was sapping its strength.

Twice Gail crept into the house to be sure the striking clock was telling the truth. Eight, it sounded. Bruce had promised to come for her at seven-thirty, but then her father was not there either. They would come together. Half past eight. The ringing gong sent a shiver across Gail's shoulders. Nine! She started to her feet and leaned against the porch railing, listening more intently. An owl called from the branches of the cottonwood by the reservoir. A lone coyote sent a plaintive yowl across the hills. The faint clop, clop of horse's hoofs sounded along the road. Nearer and nearer they came. That must be her father, but where was Bruce?

Two riders turned into the lane toward the house. Two men drew rein near the ranch house door.

"Dad, supper is over. Juliana has gone and—"

"I ate with Lafe More at the dam. I'm all tuckered out. Been in the saddle all day." Her father staggered up the steps and paused to pat her shoulder reassuringly. "I'm going to turn right in, Gail, 'fore I fall asleep in my boots. Drop by, to-morrow, Bruce, and let me hear how things at the dam are going." His voice trailed behind him as he went into the house.

Bruce McKay did not answer; he was already speaking to Gail. "I'm sorry, honey. I wanted to take you to-night; honest I did, but I promised Lafe to go back to the dam."

"Bruce! You're not taking me? You're going back to the dam, when you promised? Why?"

"Business, Gail. That's why. It ain't anything a woman could understand. The next time—"

Gail's arms were clamped tight to her sides. A cold numbness enveloped her. She stood rigid; too proud to argue; too proud to plead; too proud to answer. She only half felt Bruce's quick pressure of her cold hand; only half heard him walk to the door, speak to her father, say good night to her and run down the steps to his waiting horse.

But with each receding hoofbeat along the hard-packed road, her dreams grew evanescent, and when her straining ears could no longer catch the faintest sound, she told herself that she was awake at last.

The moon sailed higher. The sky splashed with stars. Still Gail stood, staring into the luminous night with unseeing eyes.

A car came to a rattling stop at the gate. She started. A quick fire of joy swept over her. He had come back!

"I just met Bruce McKay," called Dan Baker across the yard. Gail grew curiously cold. "He said you'd passed up the doings at the schoolhouse. Told me there was no use my asking you to go, so I didn't tell him the social's called off anyhow. Doc Wales

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says the older Bains girl may have diphtheria. Forbid any meetings at the schoolhouse till he had time to find out." Dan had reached the steps and stood looking up at her with admiring eyes. "You're dressed to step out and I've borrowed the flivver from Dad. No use our letting the evening go on the rocks. Come on, let's drive over and dance with the Mexicans. They've got the real music at this baile. Be a sport; come on."

Gail twisted at the handkerchief in her hand. So Bruce McKay had told Dan Baker not to ask her to go to the social; told him there was no use asking. And yet he hadn't thought it necessary to explain why he was going back to the dam. A woman couldn't understand; that was what he had said. Well, Bruce McKay would understand quite a few things after tonight!

"Sure, I'll go. Wait till I tell Dad." With a flutter of skirts, she was in the house and out again. She had told her father where she was going; if he hadn't heard her, she couldn't help it.

Too bad to wake him up, anyway, after he'd said he'd had a hard day.

She let Dan Baker take her arm and swayed toward him as he guided her across the yard and helped her into the place beside the wheel. She felt recklessly satisfied to think Bruce did not want her to be with Dan. And if he dreamed that she was starting to a Mexican baile with Dan— But what difference did it make after all? She was through with Bruce McKay forever.

The baile was in full swing when they parked their car by the conglomerate assortment of saddle horses, buckboards, and flivvers circling the dance hall. Dan held her close as they swung on the floor. Evidently there had been a liberal supply of mescal and tequila passing around. The men were hilarious or sullen, as the drink affected them. Even the women had been taking surreptitious nips at the bottle. Loud talk and laughter reverberated through the dead air of the packed place.

Gail's feet flew through the dance. She listened smilingly as Dan poured compliments into her ears. But all the same she felt safer when she glimpsed old Juliana sitting against the wall, her occasional teeth exposed by an enchanted grin, her fat body swaying in rhythmic time to the blare of the music.

Dan left Gail by Juliana's side when the music stopped. She wanted him to stay with her, but he was gone before Juliana could shift her weight to another chair. The old woman broke into ecstatic chatter. "It was as I said, Beatriz won the prize! But Juan, the worthless *cochino,* left her before the poor child danced! The *alimento* is good, but if they bring more tequila—"

Gail divided her attention between Juliana and the door through which Dan had disappeared. She should not have let Dan leave her. He came across the floor at last, and when she stood up to dance with him, she knew he had been drinking.

"Just a taste; no more for me," he reassured her. "That stuff would burn a brand on an army mule." But he left her once more, and Gail sat by Juliana's side to worry again.

Two—three dances passed before he appeared and looked dazedly around the room. Seeing her, he staggered in her direction. There was a bleary film over his half-closed eyes; his voice cracked with excitement. He had something to say to her that he did not want the others to hear.

Gail pulled him into a side entry where she pieced his story together bit by bit.

"The sheriff's been here! Didn't want anyone to see him! Raised hell about the drinking. Grand cusser, the sheriff. Sore about everything. Bonehead."

"But, Dan, what did you want to tell me? You've heard something. Why was the sheriff here?"

"Sheriff didn't want to talk, tell you.

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Lookin' for someone. Offered him a drink, but he knocked the bottle out of my hand. Get him for that! No way to treat—"

"Yes, yes, Dan, but who did he want to see?"

"Asked for Mexicans. Don't remember names. Trouble at the dam. Somebody killed—" His own words cleared his befuddled brain. "We'd better get away. Mexicans were leaving 'fore I came in."

Gail didn't need to be told what to do. She pulled Dan after her, back into the strangely empty dance hall. The last stragglers were hurrying out of the room. Juliana was gone.

The girl helped Dan across the floor, got his hat and her own things and started for their car. She felt bewildered as they plodded across the uneven ground. A killing at the dam! Bruce had said he was going there. It might have been— She shuddered and forced her thoughts back to Dan and their urgent need to get away. The Mexicans had already scattered like a covey of prairie chickens at the report of a gun. Horses, cars, buckboards had vanished. She must get home and find out who—

She stopped and stared about helplessly. Where was their car? Dan had parked it right by this cottonwood stump; she remembered because she had warned him not to drive too near it as they came up.

She left Dan standing in a maudlin stupor and ran around the building and down the road. The whole world seemed deserted. With distracted steps, she hurried back to try to make Dan understand that their car was stolen.

Dan called down maledictions upon the thief, but his clouded mind could not suggest a remedy. He patiently followed Gail back to the dance hall.

With her hand on the door, Gail turned to him. "There's no use going in; nobody's there." She paused to think. "We must find Juliana; that's the thing to do. She's staying with Beatriz and Beatriz lives near here. Juliana will help us."

Half running, she started down the road. Juliana had taken the buckboard to get home in the next morning, but Gail would make her drive them back now. She wouldn't start out alone with Dan Baker again tonight. Why hadn't she thought of Juliana before?

A light flashed for a second in the window of a low adobe house near the road. That must be where Beatriz lived. Thank heaven they were still awake. In her excitement, Gail pounded on the door with her fist.

A dead silence answered her. But they must have heard. "Juliana, it's Gail!" She pounded again. "Our car's gone. Come to the door!"

There was a sharp oath inside, followed by a quick scuffle. Then a faint light glowed through a high window. The door creaked open an inch or two, and Juliana's round face was pressed against the crack.

Gail explained why she was there and what she wanted. "Come on; we must start right away," she finished.

But Juliana's black eyes grew large with fear. Her lips clamped shut. She shook her head with scared glances over her shoulder.

"You mean you won't go with me?" Gail put her foot on the doorsill.

Juliana barred her way. Her head wagged a vehement negative. "Señorita! Me no can go—" Her whispered words, scarcely more than a frightened gasp, were cut off. A hand grasped her shoulder and jerked her back into the room. The door swung wide and Gail stepped across the lifted sill into the house.

A sputtering candle sent a glow of yellow light across a table in the center of the low room. Gail could barely discern the dark figures of two men just outside the radius of light. "I haven't any way to get home and you must take me, Juliana," she insisted.

One of the men, the one who still kept a tight grip on Juliana's arm,

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answered her. "The woman does not leave this place to-night! The buckboard stays here. There are horses in the corral back of the house; you can take two of them and go!"

"But Juliana has got to go with me, I—" Gail stopped short. She stared in a fascinated horror at a small, innocent-looking object that glistened in the arc of light on the table; an engineer's small clinometer.

"Where—where did you get it?" She pointed as she turned to the men, an accusing challenge in every word. Why, Bruce McKay had proudly shown that clinometer to her only last week. Lafe More, the engineer at the dam, had given it to him. How had it come here!

"It's none of your damn business where I got it. You get out of this house, queek! Before I make you! Go!"

The speaker loosed Juliana and took a menacing step toward Gail. But the other man pulled him back. They argued together in low tones, paying no attention to Juliana's staccato objections.

But Gail was not listening to them. She picked up the clinometer. Yes, there was Bruce's name scratched along the bronze rim. His name and the date—only last week, and now—But it couldn't have been Bruce who was killed. She wouldn't believe it. Dan had been drunk when he talked to the sheriff. Perhaps nobody had even been hurt. She must get those horses, though; ride home as fast as she could and then to the dam. She must know what had happened.

The men stopped talking and stood staring at her, their beady eyes shining in the darkness like the eyes of wild animals ready to spring. But they mustn't think she suspected anything. She assumed an indifference that belied the hammering of her heart.

"We'll take the horses. I must get home." She started for the door.

Juliana sprang forward and clung to her. "No—no, señorita! You must not go now! Stay with me!" She made a frantic gesture toward the man beside her. "This Juan Garcin, he—"

The man gave a quick snarl and sent Juliana sprawling to the floor with a heavy blow. As he shoved Gail from the house in front of him, she heard dry sobs punctuating Juliana's prayers to the Mother of God.

Around the house and back to the pole horse corral they hurried, Gail, Dan Baker, Juan Garcin, and the other Mexican whom Juan called Nanchez. Gail shrank from the Mexicans and edged nearer to Dan. "Help them get the horses saddled as fast as you can," she begged him.

An unintelligible grunt was Dan's only answer. He had drunk too much mescal to sense anything that had happened. Gail knew she couldn't depend on him to help her.

The horses were roped and saddled, but when Gail started to mount one of them, Juan interfered. "Not yet." His laconic command made her turn. She saw Nanchez leading two more horses from the shed that backed up to the corral.

"There's no use your going with us. Dan can ride and I know the way home. I'm sorry to have caused all this trouble. I'll see that you get the horses back to-morrow."

Juan did not answer. He let Gail take one horse and watched while Dan struggled into a saddle. Then he and Nanchez mounted and the four turned into the road.

Gail roweled her horse ahead. She had urged him to a stiff gallop, when Juan passed her and stopped. They had reached a fork in the road. Straight before them was the way to her home, but the road to the right wound through the mesas, lifted over El Sangre Range, and finally took a tortuous course to the Mexican border.

"We turn here." Juan's horse crowded Gail's mount to a standstill.

"But you are mistaken. This way leads home." She pointed down the road ahead.

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With a swift swing to one side, he caught her bridle. "We all turn here." There was finality in his tone—dangerous finality.

Rising in her saddle, Gail swung herself about to look at Dan, but he had already followed Nanchez toward the mesas.

"Dan! Dan! That's not the way!" Gail called in helpless desperation. But Dan paid no attention. He was slouched forward in his saddle, lost to the world.

Again Gail tried to pass Juan. He was still holding her bridle. He forced her horse around and they started after the others.

With a voice made steady by great necessity, she tried to persuade Juan to let her turn back. She spoke tensely of her father's worry about her. She might as well have pleaded with the towering black peaks that loomed above them. Juan rode stolidly, silently, beside her.

It was not until her control broke and her voice shrilled with fear that he whirled on her. "Shut up!" The words sent her crouching low in her saddle.

Higher and higher they climbed. Twice the man, Nanchez, turned back to ride beside her. Each time Juan ordered him to take his place ahead. But the third time Nanchez hung back of them. Before she was conscious of his nearness, he reached out and grasped her hand.

She recoiled with a sharp cry. In an instant the two men were brawling back and forth. They spoke in broken Spanish; Gail caught only a part of their meaning.

"Keep to your place! This is no time for the making of love!"

"But you give me the promise I get her—"

"*Carajo!* Get back! Later comes the time!"

Gail shrank close to the rocky wall of the trail as Nanchez reluctantly obeyed the whiplike orders.

The moon hung spent and pale in the western sky. A phantom gray light spread along the eastern horizon. Gail's thoughts went back, days—weeks—to her talks with Bruce McKay. It seemed as though she could remember everything he had ever said to her. The cool wind of the higher country blew across her cheeks. Bruce, with his steady clear voice, his quick unerring judgment—if he were only there. The rocks, trees, the road, began to take shape. One moment she felt the stifling nearness of disaster, the next a hope born of her love.

A faint chirping came from the trees and hillsides. The sound grew and intensified. The world was waking up. Still Juan and Nanchez urged their prisoners persistently ahead. They had quitted the main traveled trail and were crossing arid, rock-strewn wastes. At last they turned into a blind canyon and drew rein before a tumbled-down shack, well hidden by towering pines and heavy undergrowth.

Juan and Nanchez made no explanations, but ordered Gail and Dan to dismount. Dan had been groaning out sullen complaints for the last half hour. Now he flung himself full length under the trees and lapsed into drunken sleep.

Juan motioned Gail to follow him into the cabin, and when she hung back, took her arm and pulled her after him. She stood trembling by the window while he built a fire, rattled a grease-blackened frying pan across the rusty stove, and spread thick slabs of saltside in it.

He left her to get more wood, and Nanchez appeared at the door. His red-rimmed eyes leered at her from under bushy brows; his grinning lips stretched narrow across yellowed teeth.

Gail's frail thread of composure snapped at the sight of him. "Don't look at me that way! Don't!" She pressed her open hand, palm out, against her eyes and cowered against the wall.

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"Huh!" Nanchez's heavy boot scraped on the doorsill. He was crossing the room.

"*Cochino!* Fool! Let the woman alone!"

Gail's hand dropped to her side. She ran to the door, leaned against the casing and looked out with wide staring eyes. Juan had dragged Nanchez into the open. They were rolling back and forth across the rocks and earth, gouging viciously at each other. Nanchez's face was toward her. A sinister light flared into his eyes. His hand, grasping a knife, pulled slowly free from Juan's straining hold. With a sudden wrench his arm swung out. In an instant the knife was buried in Juan's shoulder.

Gail screamed. A gun cracked at the side of the house. Nanchez whirled on her accusingly. With a snarl, he dragged her from the doorway and flung her from him. Her body crashed against a tree. She fell. A deafening roar sounded in her ears; then blackness, merciful oblivion.

Consciousness came back slowly. Faint sounds, far-off voices, raised in sharp recrimination. Her eyelids flickered—light—a flood of remembrance.

She made a mighty effort to sit up. Arms were around her, holding her close. Someone lifted her to her feet. She was looking into the scared face of her father.

"Gail!" That one word carried a thousand agonized questions.

"I'm all right, Dad." Suddenly she was only his helpless little child again, clinging to the comfort of his arms. "Oh, Dad! Where are those men? How did you find me? And Bruce—Bruce—?"

"Don't be scared any more, honey." He smoothed the head buried in his shoulder. Juan Garcin and Filipe Nanchez are being tied up now. Before they rode off with you they ordered Juliana to drive home in the morning and tell some long lie about where you'd gone; thought they'd throw us off their track that way. But Juliana didn't wait for morning. She 'most wrecked that buckboard getting home, and blurted out the truth 'fore she had time to get into the house."

"But Bruce—Bruce is dead, they killed him, and—"

"No, Gail. Juliana told us about finding the clinometer, but Bruce had handed it back to Lafe More to be repaired. Bruce is here. It was poor old Lafe them skunks shot when he caught them trying to dynamite the dam.

Gail rode close beside Bruce McKay on the way home. They walked their horses and soon lost sight of Gail's father and Dan Baker, far ahead with the prisoners.

Bruce was silent, strangely silent. At last he leaned nearer and took her hand in his. "I haven't been playing fair with you, Gail. I haven't been seeing things straight. I've learned a good many things to-night about—about us."

Gail sighed, but did not pull her hand away. After a moment she said slowly, "I'll marry you, Bruce. Any time you say; right away if you want me to."

He tightened his hold on her hand. "I've been blind, Gail, but you won't ever have to depend on Dan Baker again to take you places." Then, as she suddenly held a smiling face close to his, he went on. "And do you think, dear, if I took 'em up and moved 'em careful, we could get a clump of them purple flowers to grow out by our front steps?"

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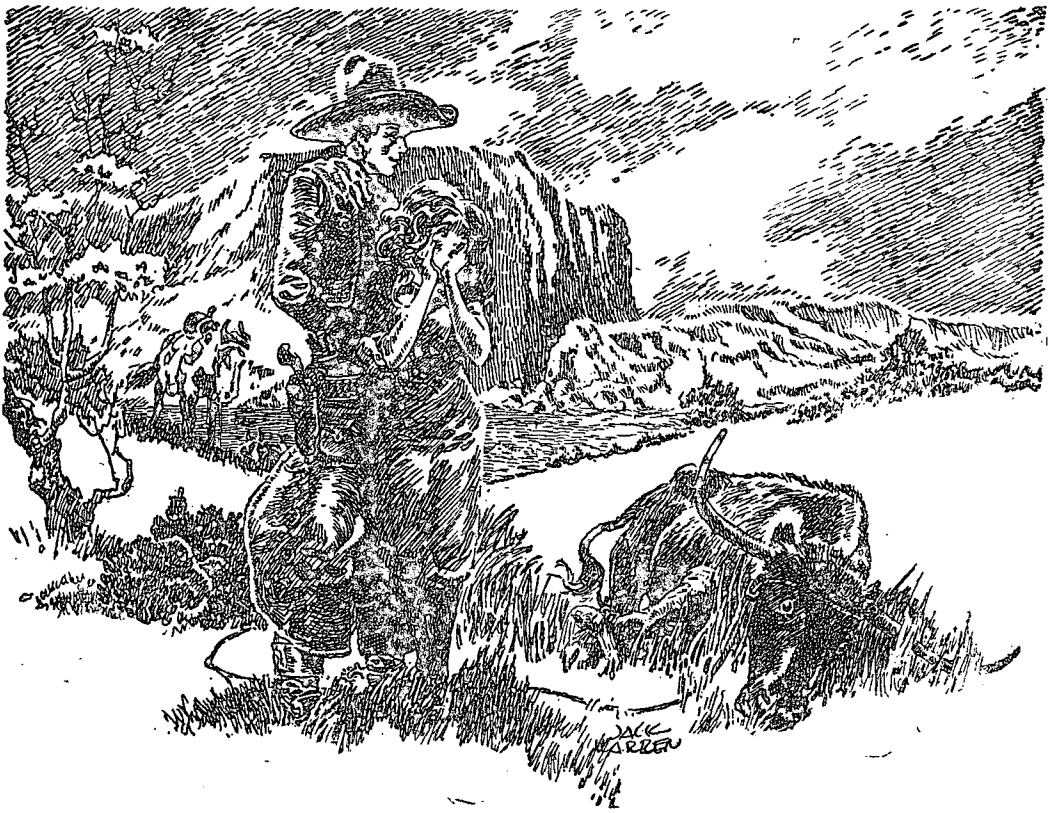

Tex of the Open Range

By William Freeman Hough

Mexes sure do hate to miss a revolution, and this bunch of range-snakes hadn't taken part in one for ages. They made up for lost time on the S-Bar-S, but did this ranny, Tex Roan, and his girl give them the worst of it? We'll say they did, folks!

OUT of the serpentine canyons of the Border hills a huge dragon was winding its way northward. It swayed at both ends, buckled at the middle, threw out tentative feelers into feeding coulees and breathed a cloud of stifling dust. At times, as it crested a hill, the head seemed to rise and inspect the territory ahead, with racing antennae feeling the way. Devastation followed in its wake; the earth fairly shook to its ponderous tread; and its advance was a threat no cattleman dared overlook.

Some miles to the north, lodged behind a boulder at the crest of a hill, stood a man and a girl. Both were watching the approach of the dragon with similar emotions. The girl, tall and well formed but with a frown of worry creasing her otherwise pleasing features, placed a pair of binoculars to her eyes and gazed steadily. The man, grizzled and burnt from long years on the range, squinted down the slope and estimated the coming damage.

"How many do you say there are, Epp?" she asked.

"Well, my eyes ain't so attlettick as they used to be, but I'm figurin' there's close to ten thousand critters in that herd."

"Ten thousand!" she breathed. "Why, Epp, they'll ruin our range!"

"Run over it like a flock o' chickens over a back porch," he nodded.

"And we can't stop them?"

"It's free range, Lucile; we can't

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stop 'em. So long as Uncle Sam lets 'em cross the Border we got to stand 'em—while they're here. Heret'fore, when the Mex got to fightin' among 'emselves, the cattle went to the best side. Now, with this revolution, them ranchers down south are beatin' the game. If they c'n get their stock across the Border afore either side nabs 'em, they're safe. You can't blame 'em, in a way, but it makes it dang tough fer us."

"We'll have to keep our stock separated."

"If we can," he nodded. "I've warned all the boys an' they been shuckin' our cattle back into the hills. But ten thousand Mex beef ain't goin' to stay in one spot. It means an extra round-up, I reckon. That means a fight with them hombres, too. Like as not they'll try to drive twenty thousand back, which ain't no lawful increase whatever."

The winding herd of cattle were now sloping down a steep hill and, scenting water at the bottom, broke into a stampede which the too few riders were powerless to stop. The dragon broke into a thousand fragments, joined and separated again as the thousands of thundering hoofs pounded down the slope toward the valley. Left far behind were two black dots, that the pair on the distant hill knew to be the chuck wagon and a camping outfit.

"I can't make out the brand," complained Lucile Stokes. "There is something burnt on the side of the first wagon, but I can't read it."

"I ain't much good with Mexes m'self," said Epp. "Like as not them cattle have got a dozen brands on 'em. Well, I'm hopin' the S-Bar-S don't get mixed in with 'em."

"If they would only swerve off to the west," she said. "In that way they would miss our ranch."

"Huh! Them yahoos can smell a ranch diggin's fer miles. Gosh. I wisht that revolution hadn't spread thisaway— Look at them critters in the creek! They'll soak up every drop of water there."

Slowly the head of the dragon lifted from the muddied stream and, reluctantly, headed up the opposite hill. Once over the next low range and they would be on the S-Bar-S Ranch. Frantic ponies weaved in and out, urging the leaders out of the creek so that they would not be crushed by the vast mountain of beef behind. It was a heartbreaking task, but the riders knew their business.

Thirty minutes later the lunging serpent spread out and swept past the two watchers. The cattle were thin and wild-eyed. Brands were very plain, now, and varied. Epp was of the opinion that several outfits south of the Border had joined together for the drive to safety. The wing riders were Mexicans—dark, swarthy men who rode recklessly and with skill. They were all well armed. The girl counted ten men within the scope of her sight. Ten men! Not half enough to handle such a herd on foreign territory.

"We might as well git back to the ranch," said Epp at last. "We'll have to lock up everything valuable."

"Wait," she commanded. "I think I see a white man down there."

"If he's with this spread he ain't no white man even if his skin ain't so dark," grumbled Epp. "Yore plumb right, though; he's got white blood in him. Comin' up this way, too."

The man in question loped up the side of the hill and pulled to a halt some thirty yards from them. Wheeling his horse about, he gazed down at the passing herd. Lucile saw that he sat straight in the saddle. His shoulders were very broad and square. The face beneath the broad-brimmed sombrero was deeply tanned and distinctly marked by a jutting chin. He wore the plainest of range apparel—a wide contrast to the bespangled riders who rode near the herd. The black butts of two guns jutted from his hips and a rifle was tucked beneath the skirt of his saddle.

"He looks dangerous," murmured the girl.

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"Plumb outfitted fer trouble," husked old Epp. "Wonder what he's doin' with this outfit."

"Some kind of a boss," she answered.

"He don't know we're here," said Epp.

As though to disprove this, the man swung his big bay about and rode directly up to the huge boulder behind which they stood. His eyes, the girl saw, were pools of blackness—smoldering beneath straight-lined brows. They fastened upon her as he swung around the edge of the boulder and stopped.

"'Mornin', ma'am," he said evenly. "Howdy?" greeting Epp. "This yore range here?"

"Yes!" snapped Epp.

"That is, we use it," said Lucile.

"I see no cattle on it."

"We was warned in time to git our stuff back in the hills a ways," grunted Epp.

"A good idea," nodded the man. "The S-Bar-S, ain't it?"

"That is right. I am Lucile Stokes, the owner."

The wide sombrero came off at once. The dark eyes sparkled with sudden charm and a set of very white teeth showed as straight lips lifted in a smile.

"Pleased to meet you, ma'am. I'm Tex Roan."

"Yore beef down yonder?" asked Epp.

"No; I'm ridin' as a rep."

"Huh! Plenty of brands in that outfit. What one you reppin'?"

"None of them. It's supposed to be one outfit. The different brands—well, you know how they do things beyond the Line."

"Then if it's just one outfit, how do you come to be a rep?"

"The U. S. A. hired me to ride high on this spread—to see that they didn't break any more laws than was necessary. I met 'em at the Border an' will stick till the revolution is over."

This bit of news changed the complexion of the situation. Epp reached for his plug and genially offered Tex a chew. Lucile brightened visibly.

"Kinda picked yoreself a job, didn't you?" grinned Epp.

"Plenty," agreed the young man.

"Mexes is pecoolyer critters," went on Lucile's foreman. "Ain't got no range kult'r whatever. Apt to run a rannie on you any time. I 'low you know the roodymints of them guns yo're a-packin'."

"I've handled 'em some," smiled Tex Roan.

"You'll have need of 'em continooal, I'm thinkin'. A Mex shore does hate to miss a revolution, an' these jaspers you got is goin' to make up fer it somehow."

"The ones with this spread are supposed to be sympathetic with the Federals. The owner is, I know. That's why Uncle Sam let him come over. But they change with the breeze, y'know."

"Do you expect to hold them here below the Santa Ritas?"

"Ma'am, I ain't expectin' too much at no time. I'm goin' to do my best with 'em. I ain't trustin' 'em out of my sight. You all had better ride close herd on yore stuff; keep 'em back as far as you can."

"We're doin' just that," nodded Epp. "Any snakebite in them wagons?"

"The patrol went through the motions of a search at the Border, but a Mex is slick. Like as not there's a jug or two of poison along."

"And you are going to live with them?" asked Lucile.

"Well, I don't see no way out of it. I ain't exactly goin' to live with 'em; just sorta be aroun'. I'll throw a camp of my own off to one side."

"We would be pleased to have you visit the S-Bar-S once in a while," she invited. "Come over and get a good meal."

"I'm right much obliged, Miss Lucile. Mex truck don't fit my innards too well."

"You'll be welcome, I'm sure—Epp, we'd better get back."

"Yeah, we'll mooch along—Keep a

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sharp eye on them fellas, Tex. Dog-gone, I wouldn't trust 'em noways."

"I'm ridin' 'em heavy," smiled the dark-eyed man. "S'long, see you later."

He dropped over the lip of the hill and joined the stringing herd below. But his visit had not gone unnoticed by the dark-skinned riders from across the Border. Two of them joined him presently, their white teeth showing in disarming smiles.

"Señor Tex have found the Señorita, eh?" said one.

"She runs this range," said the rep shortly. "They've moved their cattle so that we could have this valley. We'll stay here, too, savvy?"

"*Seguro.* Very fine grass. The rancho of the señorita is near?"

"I don't know. It don't make no difference to us. Remember that."

"*Si-Si.* We shall make the *campo* soon. But remember, Señor Tex, that I, José, am the boss here. I have the permission to range thees cattle where there is feed. You are but to watch, eh? *Seguro.*"

"Watch—you bet," said Tex, staring at the dark man steadily.

Lucile and Epp remounted their horses and swung away from the boulder. They paused briefly for one more look at the vast herd. Tex Roan was talking to two of the Mex riders and old Epp's nose wrinkled with a sudden thought.

"He never showed us no creedentials," he said suddenly. "How do we know he's reppin' fer Uncle Sam?"

"From his appearance I'd be willing to take his word for it," said Lucile.

"Yeah—" skeptically. "Y'know, girl, we're mighty close to the Border here. If that feller wasn't on the square it might turn out awful tough fer us. Things can be done here suddent. There's a war goin' across the line. Supposin' we lost a lot of beef? Time we got the Guv'ment on the job it'd be too late to do anythin' about it."

"I believe he's honest," she repeated.

"Le's hope so."

At best it was an uncomfortable invasion. The fact that one man had been delegated to supervise the herd helped a little; but one man could do but little against ten men and as many thousands of cattle. It meant that the S-Bar-S herds must be kept higher, back in the hills—and feed there should be saved until later in the season when the valley was burnt up. And if the war continued for long, the invading cattle would be pushed higher, which meant a mingling of the herds.

Lucile was thinking these things over when they rode into the S-Bar-S ranch yard. There was but little life about the place now that her five hands were up in the hills with the herd. Her cook had deserted some weeks before to join up with the rebels, and while Epp declared that it was a good riddance, it did throw the burden of the home cooking on Lucile. Epp had planned to join the boys, but with the rumor that herds were crossing the Border he decided to stay behind to guard the ranch.

He was thinking about hunting up his spare Colt and oiling up his rifle when he saw a strange horse standing near a side door of the house. From the looks of the trappings he needed no second guess as to whom it belonged.

"One of them lousy bums has found us a'ready," he growled. "I reckon they'll be as much bother as a gang o' gypsies. Wonder where the beggar is?"

Leaving their own mounts at the barn, they walked rapidly up to the house. The rider of the strange horse was nowhere in sight. By a silent signal Epp indicated that they would go in by separate doors. They met in the main ranch room and stopped to look about. Suddenly a slight noise came from the rear, and like a flash, Epp made for the kitchen.

"What'r you doin' here?" Lucile heard him ask.

"Ah, señor, I have but look for my brother."

"What brother?"

"Somewhere on the Americano

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rancho I have the brother who cooks."

The girl stepped through the door and saw a short, bespangled man facing her foreman. It was plain to her that he was more Indian that Mexican. His small, black eyes were darting about as though seeking a means of escape.

"Your brother never cooked here," she spoke up. "I don't like to have people going about my house."

"A thousand pardons, señora—or señorita, eh?—mos' likely. I shall depart pronto."

"You with that trail herd that just came in?" asked Epp, barring the way.

"But yes; I am the poor vaquero."

"Who sent you out grub rustlin'?"

"Eh? Rustlin'? I do not understand."

"Huh! Plumb dumb, eh? How about that side o' bacon you got hid under yore coat? Give it here, you robber!"

The man made as though to remove the purloined bacon, whipped out a knife instead, and lunged at Epp. The tip of the blade caught in the old man's shoulder, sank in and tore open a six-inch slit. Epp slipped back, one handed fumbling for his gun. The Mexican darted past him, shoved Lucile up against the door frame and sped on to his horse.

He was out of the yard by the time the girl had seized her rifle from a peg on the wall and raced to the door. She sent three shots at the fleeing figure but missed each time. Returning to the kitchen she found her foreman cursing vividly and trying to bind up his bleeding shoulder. Lucile Stokes was very white, but it was not from fear or the sight of blood. Deftly she dressed Epp's shoulder.

"You stay here," she commanded.

"Where you goin'?"

"To tell Tex Roan. I won't have any more of this happen."

"Please, Lucile, don't go ridin' over to that valley alone."

"I'm not afraid. I'm going to put a stop to this sort of thing right at the start."

Before the dazed Epp could think up any more protests, she left the house, mounted her horse, and went loping back toward the valley.

The big herd was spreading now; a restless blotch upon the bosom of the valley. Stringers left the main portion to browse into small canyons; two or three small bunches, finding the forward movement halted, turned back and were racing for the distant creek with several riders in hot pursuit. Lucile topped the hill and rode on toward the east side of the herd. A little to her left was drawn up a chuck wagon about which several men stood talking.

"*Buenos dias,* señorita." The voices came from just behind her.

Lucile twisted in the saddle to gaze down upon a swart Mexican who had apparently been hiding behind a rock at the crest of the hill. His dark face was twisted into a smile which disclosed a double row of white teeth. His eyes, dark and roving, took in every item of her appearance. Lucile felt as though she had suddenly come upon a rattler, only this fellow looked more oily and less apt to give a warning.

"I am looking for Señor Tex Roan," she said without answering his salutation. "He is here?"

"The señor is everywhere. *Dios.* He ees what you say—beesy. Si—that is the word. Perhaps José Hachita would serve as well?"

"I wish to see Señor Roan," she repeated.

The Mexican shrugged and waved a brown hand over the valley. "The Señorita has but to search among the cattle. That ees where he belongs."

"Kind of back-handed compliment that," said a voice behind them.

Tex Roan sat his big bay easily. How he had arrived at the hill crest without being heard, occupied the Mexican's mind for the instant. It caused his beady eyes to narrow. "I have but the señor's word for it," he explained.

"What was it you wanted, Miss Lucile?" asked Tex.

"I wanted to tell you that one of this

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man's riders has been to the ranch. Epp and I found him in the house. Epp questioned him and the man lied. We found he had stolen a side of bacon—had it hid under his jacket. Instead of giving it up he pulled a knife and stabbed my foreman."

Slowly the man upon the bay turned his smoldering glance back to the Mexican.

"Is this so, José?" he asked.

"*Madre di Dios!* Such a fellow is not of my following."

"He said that he belonged with the herd," accused the girl.

"And I ain't doubtin' it," put in Tex. "All right, José, move down to the wagon. When we get there you call in your riders and let this lady identify the man."

"But, señor—."

"Move!"

"*Si—seguro;* but I tell you thees man is not here."

This statement was disproved before they reached the chuck wagon. Lucile spoke suddenly and pointed to a short rider who lounged against the side of the wagon. Attention being called to him, the fellow tried to slip away, but was halted by a command from Tex.

"That is he," Lucile said, pointing.

"But no," protested José Hachita. "Pedro is one of my best men. It could not be so."

"Save that soap for the court," warned Tex. Then to the man, "Step out here, hombre. Stand there with your hands away from yore hips. *Bueno.* Now, where is the lady's bacon?"

"No savvy, señor."

Tex dismounted and walked to the wagon. It took him but a moment to uncover the side of bacon; it had been hid beneath a sack of beans.

"I thought so. Pedro, you are under arrest, savvy? Take that gun off yore hip and drop it on the ground. Careful how you do it."

"He has a knife," warned Lucile.

"I'm comin' to that," said Tex. "Get shet of that blade, too. Maybe there's two? Shuck 'em out, fella. Good! I had a hunch there was two. Now stand away from the wagon."

The thief was scowling darkly as he obeyed all the commands. Once he sent a pleading glance at José, and Lucile thought she saw an answer in the Mexican's eyes. Under his breath Pedro muttered a string of very uncomplimentary oaths, mostly directed at the girl who had caused his trouble. Though Lucile did not understand them, Tex Roan did. Like a striking snake he leaned forward and slapped the man across the mouth. The force of the blow sent Pedro sprawling backward.

Instantly the hot air about the wagon grew brittle. The other three Mexicans present stepped clear and reached for guns. Tex swung upon them, his black eyes blazing. A gun was in his hand, though none of them saw the motion which drew it. Pedro's hat had tumbled off and he was fumbling for it as he sat upon the ground.

"Tex!" Lucile's cry spun the tall puncher around. Pedro had recovered his hat and had extracted a small pistol from the crown.

There came two crashing reports. Tex's hat left his head with a small bullet hole in it. Pedro doubled up like a bent twig, then slowly began to straighten. His swart body quivered once, then lay still.

There was something suggesting a smile about the stern lips of the puncher. Lucile marked it as anything but humor. She saw him swing his Colt about to cover the men before him. Wide-eyed, they hoisted their hands high.

"Kinda lousy with guns an' knives, this outfit," said Tex to no one in particular. "José, remember this: I can understand yore lingo perfect. Don't try any more tricks like this."

"You have kill Pedro!" choked the Mexican leader.

"Shore have; an' he's only number one if things don't go straight in this camp. Savvy? I'm not foolin' with

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yore crowd—All right, Miss Lucile, we'll be movin' along. I'll bring the bacon."

"Perhaps you'd better stay here, Mr. Tex; I wouldn't turn my back on these men if I were you."

"I'm seein' you back to the rancho," he stated calmly. "As far as my back is concerned—well, let any of 'em try to put a hole in it!"

If two hours of the invasion could bring so much strife, what would days and perhaps weeks bring? Lucile spoke of this as she and Tex reached the hill top and dropped down the other side.

"It ain't unnatural," he said. "Those hombres are in a new country, a place plumb rich with spoils an' opportunity. When they leave they'll take everything they can get away with. I'm not sayin' that all Mexes are that way, but this crowd is such. I figured 'em out on the way up here. An' I got my orders, same is perfect to my notions o' law an' order. I'm carryin' 'em out."

"But they are all enemies of yours, now."

"Which same don't bother me a whole lot. I'd have to watch 'em close anyhow. I hated to give it away that I savvied Mex, 'cause I'll lose out overhearin' a mess o' plans now. But I've heard things already; they aim to work back into the hills, mess their herd up with as many of yore beef as they can and get away with 'em when they leave. I'm the thorn in their bosoms when it comes to that, so they'll try to put me away before leavin' time comes."

"Oh, Tex!" she cried.

"Pshaw, don't worry about that none, girl. I've been up against worse games. All I want is the promise of help from yore outfit."

"I promise that," she said hastily. "My men are up in the hills with my cattle. They have orders to hold off any Mexican cattle that come up there. Of course it is open range, but I think the Government has overstepped the open range law when they let Mexicans herd large bunches of cattle on it."

"It's somethin' they call policy," explained Tex. "I ain't in sympathy with it m'self, so you can bet I'll hold that gang close." Abruptly he changed the subject. "How come you run this ranch by yoreself? Meanin' no disrespect, o'course."

"Father was killed in a stampede ten years ago. I was left to do the best I could. Old Epp has been my right hand man all these years, but he's getting old now, and—"

"Yeah; was he hurt bad with that knife?"

"Just an open cut; not deep, but painful. He'll be all right in a week or so. There he is now, standing outside the door waiting for me." She waved a reassuring hand.

Tex Roan did not accept Lucile's urgent invitation to stay for a meal, explaining that he was needed back in the valley. Even now, aroused by the trouble, José might be scattering his herd northward into the hills, and, once they were joined, they would never be separated without a battle royal.

Lucile watched him as he rode back toward the trouble-filled valley. With the afternoon sun beating down upon him, he looked like some bronzed statue being born along on a charger. He fairly radiated efficiency and confidence; there was a set to his shoulders and a grace of bearing that fascinated the girl. She thought of her first impressions of the coming herd; how it reminded her of some great, winding serpent, riding along on a sea of heat waves, bound for her range, to trample and wither it. Was Tex Roan acting the knight errant in this too-real fantasy?

At dawn the next morning Lucile scribbled a note, left it where Epp would find it and, packing a bit of lunch, rode from the ranch. She intended to ride up into the higher hills to give her men further warning, but first she would circle above the valley to see how the Mexican herd had spent the night. Though Tex had full charge of the situation, she was grateful that

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he had not requested her to stay at home. Most men would have warned her seriously to stay at the ranch, and would have lost her respect in so doing. But Tex, evidently, gave her credit for some ability.

But things had happened in the four-mile-wide valley the night before. It was physically impossible for one man to watch a herd of ten thousand half-wild cattle. Add to this the intent of the Mexican herders, and you have a combination hard to beat. Lucile instantly saw that the herd was depleted by nearly half. A few stragglers fed at the mouths of canyons—an indication of the avenues of ascent to the hills. Within the entire scope of her vision she saw but three men. Where were the other six? And where was Tex?

Following a ridge, she worked northward, gradually getting into rougher country. To her right the ridges sloped off step by step to smooth out into the valley of the home ranch. To her left the walls grew steeper, fingers of canyons beneath which led from the river valley back into the hills. Miles above her a green strip showed where the forests spread a band of shelter and furnished feed nourished by snow-clad peaks.

For nearly two hours she wended her way upward. The ridge she was on formed the cattle trail to the hills. But there were countless trails in the canyon pits for cattle to use. Were those narrow runways filled with the invading cattle? But she saw no indications of this yet. A trifle higher up the canyons converged, came to a common point like a fan. Clustered about this natural handle was a group of boulders around which the too-infrequent rains poured streams into the various maws. It was here that the S-Bar-S cattle had to be handled carefully to keep them from diverging on the home trip from the hills.

She was reaching behind her saddle to secure a sandwich when a bullet flicked a rock before her and went humming off to the right. Startled, she glanced up. A man with a rifle in his hands was waving to her from behind one of the boulders at the head of the canyons. She saw that it was Tex. But why had he shot at her? At first she was indignant at the greeting, then, as she thought swiftly, it came to her that the shot was in the nature of a warning. And his hand was waving earnestly, too; waving her back from the ridge. With one movement she lifted her pony from the ledge and down to the sheltering side. Here she spent two minutes debating.

Tex Roan breathed a sigh of relief as the girl disappeared. He turned back to the terrible task before him. Three of the canyon mouths were choked with dead cattle—tribute to his swift and unerring aim. Behind the dead pile other beasts surged, their eyes wild with fright and their tongues hanging out from thirst. They could not turn back for the simple reason that Mexican punchers were behind. Now and then a steer would try to leap the barrier of quivering flesh, only to add to the mounting pile of dead animals.

From the side of a canyon two hundred yards below, a fresh spurt of flames leaped. The bullets struck Tex's shelter and caromed off into space. Tex did not waste any shots on these men; he was saving his ammunition for the final rush of cattle and men up the canyons. And his ammunition was growing very scarce. He hoped that Lucile would round the ridge, find her own men and bring them down to lend a hand. Would she do this or would she turn back to the ranch?

"Tex?" The call came from behind and he spun about.

"Lucile! You shouldn't come down here. How did you make it?"

"Circled the ridge, left my horse hidden and crawled down behind the boulders. Oh, Tex, all those steers dead. What does it mean?"

Again the bronzed puncher smiled that unhumorous smile. "The Mexes

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went loco after that deal with Pedro last night. They split their herd a thousand ways and headed 'em up the hills. The best thing I could do was beat 'em up here an' try to hold 'em out."

"Won't José listen to reason?"

"I tried that, and the confab ended up with me knocking him cold with my bare hands. They nicked me twice before I could get to my horse."

"Oh—! Where? Badly?"

He shrugged. "Not so bad, but the wounds get stiff once in awhile."

"Let me see. I'm pretty good with wounds."

He submitted to her ministrations, all the time keeping his eyes fastened on the canyons.

"They are not so bad," she announced. "I'll go get my canteen."

"Bring all the ammunition you got," he said. "I'm runnin' low."

"Tex—" pausing, "don't you think it would be better to get word to the authorities? The Government will never stand for this."

"Which same would be admittin' that I failed to make them greasers behave. Naw, sir—I mean ma'am. I'll stick it out an' turn 'em back. They had strict orders not to try this. Take it easy goin' back, 'cause they'd just as soon draw down on you as not."

As she hurried back up the hill she wondered why she had not heard any shots as she came up the ridge. Possibly all the cattle killing had been done before she came within hearing distance. This, then, was just a lull, and peaceful moments in any battle were the worst. What were the Mexicans planning?

The question lent speed to her steps. From her saddle she lifted a canteen and a belt of cartridges for a thirty-thirty. She couldn't remember if Tex's gun was that caliber, so she took her Marlin along also. Halfway back a movement almost at her level, caught her eye. She saw just the tip of a black sombrero as it dodged from rock to rock. And that hat was above Tex! One of the gang was working in behind him, to pick him off.

She was very calm as she set down her burdens and pumped a shell into the gun barrel. Resting the weapon against the side of a rock she waited until the hat again appeared. Came the crown, a part of the upturned brim and then a dark face. Slowly she squeezed the trigger. Even as the exploding gun jolted her shoulder, she saw the hat fall. A dark face fell back against a rock and slowly slipped down. The sight gave her no feeling of exultation; if she had killed a man it was in the defense of her rights. If she had killed a man—? And suddenly a sense of elation did come. If she had killed a man, she had saved Tex Roan!

She had no desire to see the results of her aim, but the way down to Tex led past the boulder which hid her target. Arriving there she could not help but look. But no hat, no man was there. A trace of blood on the side of the rock was the only sign she saw. Then he had been only wounded! As she paused in surprise there came a swift swish. Something tightened across her chest and dragged her arms to her sides.

"So-o," hissed a voice behind her. "I have caught the señorita! You are what they call the cat, eh?"

Lucile twisted around to face José Hachita. The Mexican's eyes glowed triumphantly, revengefully, for his cheek lay wide open where her bullet had plowed across it. "Turn me loose!" she panted.

"Not so queeckly." With a swift turn of his wrist he made another loop about her. "Now, I, José, shall say what shall be done. *Dios!* That gringo behind the rock has kill many cattle. You shall pay."

Lucile expanded her lungs to the utmost and gave one cry. "Tex!"

Tex Roan spun about to find himself facing a gun. Where had that cry come from? But the man covering him was not of the Mexicans.

"Hell," grumbled old Epp, lowering

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his gun. "I thought you was one of them—"

"How did you get here?" demanded the puncher.

"Come up over the ridge. Was trailin' Lucile."

"Did you see her?"

"Saw her horse, that's all. She left a note this mornin' sayin' she was comin' up here, so I took her trail."

"Did you hear that cry just now."

"Cry? No; but then my ears ain't so attlettick as they used t'be. Someone yelp?"

"It sounded like Lucile. She went back for more amunition."

"What's all this mean? Them Mexes tryin' to run a rannie?"

Swiftly Tex told him what had happened. "Can you stick here an' hold 'em off a while?" he finished. "I gotta go back an' see what that yelp meant."

"Shore can," grunted Epp. "Leave me that rifle o' your'n an' I'll hold them buzzards till the cows come home. Watch out fer a trap, though; them hombres ain't t'be trusted none whatever."

Zigzagging up along the sheltering line of boulders, Tex finally came to the spot where José had slipped his riata over Lucile. The puncher saw the red on the rock, swore roundly and stooped to pick up the girl's canteen—the only remaining part of her burden.

"If some greaser has nicked her I'll kill every damn one of 'em," he swore. Bending down, he set his dark, angry eyes to the task of picking up the trail. There was sign of two pairs of boots, faint, yet to his eyes plain enough. They straggled back up the hill and bore off to the west. Now and then the smaller marks showed where Lucile had braced against captivity. This proved to Tex that she was not badly hurt.

While old Epp had plenty of confidence, his ability to hold back the horde was far short of his words. The Mexicans below sensed some change in the program and immediately began to crowd the sweltering cattle back toward the barrier. Epp shot wildly, using five precious shells to knock down three steers. And then he discovered that the magazine was empty. And his wounded shoulder was throbbing from the jolting of the gun butt. Swearing earnestly he began a retreat up the draw. One steer cleared the pile of dead animals and came charging toward him. Epp threw up his old Colt and knocked the animal to its knees. But others were coming now, and Epp, realizing what would happen were he caught beneath a stampede, scrambled wildly for higher ground.

Tex saw the break come. Hundreds of clawing hoofs mauled the pile of dead critters back and gradually opened a narrow lane. They were through! Somewhere higher up his own horse stood waiting, but his chances of reaching the saddle were very poor. It was too late, now, to head the herd, so he increased his pace toward the west on Lucile's trail. He dipped into a narrow canyon and began toiling up the far side.

Epp was about to give up hope of reaching safety when, out of the north and riding like devils, came five men. Through the haze of dust he recognized them as his own boys, and his old throat lifted in a jubilant Apache yell. The S-Bar-S hands had listened to the distant firing for almost an hour, then, unable to restrain themselves longer, they left the home herd and came boiling down from the tree line.

One glance at the scene was enough for them. With shrill yells they headed into the coming charge of cattle and, shooting some and heading back others, managed to stem the upward rush. Five of them converging on the canyons' heads halted the struggle upward and turned a thoroughly crazed mass of Mexican cattle back the way they came. The herders below turned and fled for their lives, with forked hoofs beating out a death tempo behind them.

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Epp dug the dust out of his eyes and stared at the scene about him. Dead and dying steers lay about. "'Nough beef here t'feed all them Mexican armies," he muttered. "But I bet it's so dang tough nobuddy but a rebel could chew it. Man, oh, man, wait till that stampede reaches the valley! I'm bettin' the Border sees this spread afore dark." He reached for a consoling plug. "Wonder what became of that Tex feller? An' where is Lucile?"

José had dragged Lucile to the last canyon on the west. He had come up that way in order to be as far from Tex's sight as possible. His scheme was to get in behind and shoot the Government puncher down. This would open up the way for the cattle. Once those rangy steers were back in the hills, getting them out without taking other brands along would be difficult. It was a very profitable idea, if it worked. But the Tex hombre was proving a hard man to deal with.

However, now that he had captured the señorita, José's plans were materially aided. He would use her as a leverage to get his stock into the higher ground. There had actually been no limit set for the herd except those designated by Tex. And the fact that the gringo had killed Pedro would be an argument favorable to the cause in case anything unpleasant followed the invasion.

A quarter of a mile down the canyon was the Mexican's horse; he would load the señorita on to the horse, climb on behind and ride back to where Tex was holding forth. With the girl as a shield he could get near enough to explain his purpose and desires. Let the gringo shoot, if he dared. But stumbling along, holding back, delaying in any way she could, Lucile caught a glimpse of a well known sombrero cresting the ridge to the left.

She began to limp painfully and at last sank down with an angry exclamation. "My boot is cutting my foot," she said. "Untie my hands so that I can take it off."

José's teeth flashed in a knowing smile. "Untie the hands? But no; I bare no cat's claws to my skin."

"But there is no hurry. Your steers are clear of the canyon."

"So? You heard the shots, eh?"

"Yes; and they were too many for one man to make. This deal will be tough enough for you without torturing my feet."

"It cannot be said that José was ungallant," smirked the Mexican. "But the ropes? No. I shall remove the boot. Or would it not be better to carry you?"

"Take it off," she said abruptly, the thought of resting in the swart man's arms being too much.

José looked carefully up and down the canyon, then knelt before her. Lucile bit her lips as he grasped her right boot and began to pull. There was nothing the matter with her foot but the delay in removing the boot would help Tex. She wondered just where he was, how much nearer he had gotten to them. She had tried to leave a plain trail for him.

Tex was coming. Taking advantage of any and all cover he was working along toward the last canyon of the group. Just once he saw the pair he was trailing, and it whipped up his flagging spirits. He tried to think of some plan whereby he could get at José without hurting Lucile. If it was José who had her—and he was not sure—he had a crafty enemy ahead.

Suddenly the Mexican looked up to see the girl's eyes fastened upon a boulder midway up the sloping wall of the canyon. Still fumbling with her boot, he drew a gun and brought it around carefully. They were partially hid under a ledge. Tex's eyes were scorched with the heat—having carried his hat the last one hundred yards to prevent the crown from betraying his position. He thought he saw a darker spot below him but was not sure. Slowly he raised from his temporary shelter and craned his neck downward.

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José's gun was up and covering Tex's breast when Lucile lowered her eyes. The open wound on the Mexican's face was widened as his jaws set. The expression told her that he was looking at Tex. Her next movement was instinctive rather than planned. Her doubled right knee straightened with a jerk. Her heel struck José squarely in the chest and sent him sprawling backward.

How swiftly the shots came! It seemed to the girl that the space between them could not be measured. José's body jerked twice. He doubled over and rolled ten feet down the trail. But he ended up on his knees and with his gun crashing spitefully. Two more shots came from above and he lay still. Lucile leaned back against the wall and half closed her eyes.

"You all right, girl?" Tex's dripping face appeared before her.

She nodded. "I held him back by saying my foot hurt."

"Yeah? Oh, I see, now, how he happened to go bouncing out of here; you kicked him! My gosh, Lucile, I've made a mess outa this deal. If it hadn't been for yore men comin' when they did, this Mex outfit would have been all over yore range."

"My men? They came?"

"I reckon it was them. Came down outa the timber like a pack o' wolves. I saw 'em meet the steers at the canyon top an' turn 'em back. That was my job, but I shore fell down on it."

"You were coming after me. You couldn't be in two places at once."

"I shouldn't of let José sneak up behind. If you hadn't of seen him I'd of been buzzard bait by this time. Yeah, I shore did mess up the deal. Poor ol' Epp. I wonder how he got out of it?"

"Epp? Up here?"

"Come a trailin' after you. I left him to hold the steers back while I run down that jasper layin' there. I reckon he got stomped t'death."

Lucile Stokes leaped to her feet. "Come," she cried. "We must find him. If he's buried under those cattle he may still be alive." She pulled on her boot and throwing off the riata Tex had cut to bits, grasped him by the hand and led him swiftly back up the canyon.

Arriving at the spot where Epp had been left, they saw plenty of evidence of what had taken place. Dead steers were at least a hundred yards above the boulder where Tex had hidden. They looked beneath the animals but saw nothing of the old foreman. Lucile was very near to tears when they began tearing at the mass of dead animals at the canyon head.

"He's been like a father to me," she choked. "I'll never forgive myself if anything happened to him."

Tex strained at the stiff leg of a steer. "It's my fault for askin' him to stay here," he panted. "Just another one of my mistakes."

"Hush, Tex, you were doing your best."

"Hey!" came a sudden voice from above them. "What you two rannies doin' down there? Tryin' t'find a decent steer in that Mex pile?"

"Epp!" cried Lucile. "Where on earth have you been?"

"I might be askin' you the same thing," answered Epp. He slapped his horse's neck and moved nearer. "I rode down the ridge a ways t'see what happened in the valley. Lord a-mighty, I never saw such a stampede in all my born days. An' the boys are still razzin' 'em. They ain't nothin' left in the valley but a busted chuck wagon. Steers is bogged down in the creek, what ain't headin' fer the Border hills."

"Where are the Mex herders?" asked Tex.

"Search me. I can't see such small critters at that distance. Man, you shore gave that layout a short stay in this here country."

"I didn't do much," said Tex bitterly.

"Well, you had the right idee," grinned Epp. "I reckon you'd make a right smart foreman, if you tried."

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"I'm huntin' a reg'lar cow job pronto," said Tex. "When it comes to herdin' Mexes, I ain't so good."

"It all depends how you look at it," said Epp. "Me, I'm plumb satisfied the way things have gone here. It'll teach 'em buzzards a lesson. They'll behave the next time they come across." Epp scratched his grizzled thatch and surveyed the pair below him. "Speakin' o' huntin' a cow job, how'd you like to tie up with this outfit?"

Tex glanced at Lucile but did not answer. His hesitation spurred the old man on. "I'll resign my foreman job fer you if you'll take it," he said.

"You'll do nothing of the sort," exclaimed the girl. "What would Father think if I let you resign?"

"Huh. I bet he's been lookin' down fer quite a spell an' wonderin' how long his daughter is goin' to keep an ol' gent like me as foreman. Why, I'm plumb stove in; ain't attlettick atall no more." He grinned and reached for his plug.

Lucile stared up at the old man without speaking. She saw that his gray eyes were twinkling with hidden mischief. There was something behind all this talk of resigning. Quite suddenly she suspected what it was and the blush that crept across her face tickled old Epp.

"You ride along," she commanded. "I've got a better plan in mind. You are still foreman of the S-Bar-S."

"Just as you say," grinning. "If you got a better plan, why, I'm dead sure it'll suit me."

At the ridge he pulled up and looked back. Lucile was pouring water from the canteen over the two wounds in Tex's shoulder. He saw the tall young man reach back and wipe his grimy hands on his chaps, then they came forward to circle her waist. Lucile drew back slightly and Epp frowned. Was she going to balk? But no, she had drawn in again and her finger tips were touching the square jaw above her. Epp sighed when she at last relaxed in the puncher's arms.

"Doggone," he breathed. "I thought fer a minute I hadn't guessed her plan right. Foreman! Huh! Ketch me resignin'. But, dang it, I had t'say that t'git 'em to thinkin' about 'emselves."

MEMBERS OF TRAIL'S END

Whose pictures appear on pages 592 and 593

PAGE 592

FIRST ROW—*left to right*—F. Barnes, Woodburn, Ore.; Dorothy E. Bates, Hallowell, Me.; Tex Kinley, Pittsburgh, Pa.

SECOND ROW—*left to right*—Hattie Hillegars; Peakiomenville, Penn.; Aaron McMeekin, Colorado, Tex.; Earl Woodson, Rocky Mount, N. C.

THIRD ROW—*left to right*—Walter Farrington, Rapid City, S. D.; Eva Woolridge, Mattoon, Ill.; Audie M. Armstrong, Decker, Mont.

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FIRST ROW—*left to right*—Norman A. Borgen, Minneapolis, Minn.; Howard Zehn and father, Seattle, Wash.; Henry U. Bauman, Bird Island, Minn.

SECOND ROW—*left to right*—Anna Ayers, Yonkers, N. Y.; Hazel C. Mills, Ottawa, Canada; Miss Domaestes, Peoria, Ariz.

THIRD ROW—*left to right*—Viola Hartberg, Welcome, Minn.; Mrs. S. J. Herman, El Paso, Tex.; Norman Hull, Miller's Falls, Mass.

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For a Woman

By H. A. Woodbury

It's doggone queer the way a girl, who's never been in love before, will fall with a crash for a man and believe in him even when the cards are stacked against him, and never even ask for the proof of his innocence.

WHEN Ginger Marston was sixteen, her father had shaken his head over her and sighed.

"It's high time, you young roughneck, that you was growin' up an' bein' a lady. Do you know what I heard, to-day?"

Ginger had cocked her head on one side and had observed him studiously. She was an exceedingly trim young creature, lithe and slender as a young boy, in blue jeans and boots. Her brown eyes twinkled in mischief. And her sunburned nose wrinkled as she twisted her very charming features into a grimace.

"I reckon," she drawled, meeting his gaze stoutly, "that them danged English sparrows has been tellin' you how I was throwin' rocks at Spud Eastland."

Her father nodded. "An' they went on to say that you knocked his brand new Sunday Stetson off in the dirt."

"It was an accident," said Ginger.

"Accident!"

"Yeah. I meant to get him in the jaw."

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Her father blinked. Spud was something of a local potentate. People might accuse him of sharp practise, sometimes, but still he was better off than most neighboring ranchers.

"He tried to kiss me at the dance the other Saturday night," Ginger went on, "and I slapped his face for him. Told him if he came near me again, he'd better watch out. Well, he thought I was kiddin', that's all. An' I wasn't. Why, the old grasshopper's old enough to be my father."

"There's worse men in Hopi county, though," suggested her father. For the cowman couldn't forget his ambitions for the girl.

"I dare say," smiled Ginger, "but I haven't any use for any of 'em. Men —gosh, they give me a pain in the neck. They go gettin' that fool love light in their eyes, an' then they're plumb useless."

"Reg'lar man-hater, ain't you?"

"I am," said Ginger determinedly.

Her father sighed rather softly. And for a moment, he regarded the gaudy sweep of desert and sky.

"Well," he said finally, "I only hope when you do fall, you'll fall for the right one. Your kind loves jest as unreasonably as it hates, Ginger. A man'll come along some day, an' you'll worship him without askin' no questions. I—well, girls like you need a guardian angel."

"Applesauce," said Ginger. "I've got too much sense to fall in love."

But her father was right, and Ginger was wrong. Of course! Although for a time it looked the other way round. That is, Ginger broke hearts all over Hopi county, and gave no sign of being affected, herself, until she met Steve Cheyne.

She had just passed eighteen, and she was riding very slowly out of Mesquite Gulch, one morning, wearing the new red inlaid boots and the fringed leather skirt her father had given her for her birthday, when the stranger, coming in the opposite direction, hailed her.

He sat a chunky little blue roan very erectly, and she noticed especially the lean alertness of his bronzed face and the broad expanse of his well built shoulders.

"How much farther to town?" he asked her.

She set up her buckskin beside him, and noted in addition the bulges of muscle under his frayed blue shirt.

"'Bout an hour," she told him. Then she added. "You lookin' for a job?"

He nodded.

She was never able, afterward, to decide what had made her so impulsive, that morning. Fate, no doubt. At any rate, she had smiled at him warmly.

"Then why don't you come on back with me? Dad'll give you a job."

The stranger did not answer her for what seemed an age. She felt his keen blue eyes taking her in minutely, but in a way she couldn't possibly resent. They were rather sad eyes for a man so young. He couldn't have been more than twenty-two. There was a shade of wistfulness in his glance. He looked at her as if he had beheld beauty which he could admire in reverence, but which he dared not touch.

"Thanks," he said finally. "I—I reckon I'd better not. I'll look around in town."

Again there was no offence in his manner.

After he pushed on, Ginger held her own pony still, and watched him as he jogged through the yellow dust. He did not look back. He kept on until he finally disappeared in the green featheriness of a mesquite clump.

Ginger frowned. It was the first time in her life that a man had refused to be utterly enthralled upon mere sight of her. In a measure she was justifiably annoyed. In a measure, also, she was intrigued. This was something a little new in masculine behavior.

Could Ginger have had, at that moment, some sort of magic X-ray instrument to see into the young man's breast, she would have discovered that it was nothing new, after all. Steve

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Cheyne's heart was palpitating just as wildly as any other man's.

If he managed to conceal it, that was his own affair. More secrets than one were hidden in that breast.

In the next two weeks, she saw him at neither of the Saturday night dances. This implies, of course, that she looked for him. She thought possibly that he had drifted straight through Mesquite Gulch. But he hadn't, as she was to discover.

On the third Saturday, she had gone out to the Bar Diamond soda springs, fifteen miles the other side of town in the blue foothills to the North with a group of her high school friends.

It was a hot, lazy, Southwestern afternoon, and the sun's rays curled up visibly from the rocky, yucca-covered hillside. Most of the group decided to sit around the springs and chin. Not Ginger. She was more adventurous.

They had come out by automobile, so that she had no horse, but she determined, nevertheless, to climb the steep slope at whose base they were.

She set out, alone, picking her way up the rocky incline with the nimbleness of a mountain goat. She arrived presently at the top, sat down for a brief moment to thrill in ecstasy at the view of the far-flung desert valley behind her, and then continued on down the other side toward the cool trickle of Cedar Creek.

The brush was thicker, here—the descent more precipitous. She stumbled onto the sheer edge of a sharp drop into the canyon before she quite realized where she was. Then, while she was still laboring with her footing, she saw the men down below, and the men caught sight of her.

There was a shout. Then a burst of obscenity, and she saw a man fling himself into a saddle. She struggled to climb back up the steep slope, away from this camp of desert rats, but she realized in a flash that the man was going to cut her off. Through the brush up above, a rider came loping toward her. She looked up to see Steve.

The next few moments were a revelation in riding and roping and battle. The broad-shouldered cowboy whose name she did not even know was everywhere at once. He let fly with his rope and yanked the advancing ruffian out of his saddle. Then he charged on down the trail into the camp of the others. He shot an automatic out of the hands of one man. The rest put up their hands.

In a moment he had the whole group rounded up. Ginger scrambled down to join him in a second.

"Brady fired these punchers a week ago," he explained, "an' since then they've been stickin' round, raisin' hell all over the ranch. Smashin' water troughs, runnin' cattle, an' otherwise ventin' poison. I asked Brady if I could round 'em up, an' I been hot on their trail fer two days."

He spoke of it all modestly—as if it were nothing but sheer routine in a puncher's life. Ginger stared at him with eyes wide with admiration.

"Well, I'm sure glad you happened along," she sighed.

The two of them exchanged significant glances.

Ginger added in a second, "You'd better let me help you into the sheriff's office with them."

It seemed only natural, after that, that she should at last persuade him to attend a Saturday night dance. But it took a little pleading, even so.

"You know," said Ginger, "you act plumb scairt of me."

"Maybe I am," he suggested.

"Why? I won't bite you."

"Well—" He met her glance frankly, "it ain't quite safe fer an' unbranded cowpoke like me to be exposed to such attractiveness. I'm danged impressionable."

Ginger saw no sin in that.

Neither did Steve, apparently, by the time the evening got under way. They danced on the torch-lit, open-air pavilion, out under the stars, and they sat out the long intermissions in the little cottonwood grove, beyond.

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Ginger introduced him to her father. The old cowman liked Steve. Brady, Steve's employer, was there, too, and this rancher was in a genial mood over the afternoon's exploit.

"Steve, here, come a-driftin' in outa nowhere," grinned Brady. "Couldn't git it outa him where he'd been er what he'd done. Mighta thought he'd been a road agent he was so danged secretive. But blamed if he ain't won his right to stay here. Them rats he cleaned out this afternoon weren't jest sneakin' bums. They was desperate killers."

Ginger was standing at Steve's side when the man uttered his words of praise, and she gave her cowboy's hand a tiny, very pleased squeeze. Steve returned it, and glanced down into her admiring eyes.

"You know," he said, "it means a lot to me if that there's true. I've come a long ways to find a home."

After that, he was even more at ease, more natural, the rest of the evening. When he and Ginger laughed, out under the stars, it was as if the two of them, just he and she, had been laughing together all their lives.

Just before the evening was over, though, a man on the edge of the crowd called to Steve as he was standing alone for a moment. Only—he didn't use the name, Steve.

"Hey, there, Gyp." The tone was imperious. Steve tried to ignore it, but the man was insistent.

Steve came over slowly, "Well, what do you want? Trying to shake me down?"

The man shook his head. He was a considerably older man, about forty, probably. "Nope," he said, "you've got me wrong, Gyp. This ain't blackmail. I jest want to talk to you after the dance. I've got a little proposition."

Steve's face flushed angrily.

"I'm through with jobs like that," he said.

The man smiled. "Going straight?"

Steve nodded. "Going straight. And I mean it."

"Well—" The man's smile became a shade warmer, "this here's on the level. It won't hurt you to talk it over, anyway."

Steve did not answer. As he left the man to walk back to Ginger, cold beads of perspiration were crowding to his forehead.

The dance was just breaking up. Ginger asked him as tactfully as she could, whether he was seeing her home or whether she had better go back with her father.

"You'd better go with your dad," he said. Then, suddenly, impulsively, he took her hand in a brief squeeze. "I'm sayin' good-by, Ginger, good-by for good."

"Good-by?" the girl gasped. "But I thought you jest said—"

"That I'd found a home?" He shook his head sadly. "Nope. Reckon I was jest kidden' myself. I got to be driftin' along."

"Where?"

He pointed vaguely off toward the shadowy horizon. "Somewhere in them blue hills. I dunno—"

They stood there very close together in the pale starlight. Their eyes probed each other deeply. Ginger thought for a moment that Steve was going to kiss her. He seemed to waver unsteadily. He wanted to, but he didn't.

Steve Cheyne left the dance alone, that night, his mind made up. Any sort of proposition this stranger was offering him was not to his liking. He was off that stuff—for good.

He had walked out of San Quentin three months before, not only a free man, but a changed man. He had had three long years to think and to think deeply. Father O'Hara had been a constant inspiration to him during those dark days behind gray walls. All the old, vacillating weakness had been seared out of his soul.

For his fault in the old days had never been more than weakness. He had been mixed up in a couple of jobs of the Black Mountain Gang, but only as a sort of tagger-along. The others

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had planned; the others had struck. He had accompanied them simply because he had lacked the gumption to say no.

That side of him was gone, now—definitely and forever. He knew it as positively as he knew he was alive. His present actions bore it out, the more.

He was leaving Mesquite Gulch and the temporary hospitality it had granted him, not so much because he feared this stranger would expose him as a one-time outlaw and ex-convict, as for another more powerful reason. Exposure would doubtless soon come, wherever he went. He would be man enough to live it down. He was fleeing out of strength, and not weakness, for he had read Ginger's eyes, and he had read his own heart.

He must drift before the spark in each was kindled into an unruly flame. He and the girl were in love. It was impossible, considering her loveliness. He must vanish before it made a difference.

He strode over to the hitching-rail and flung himself heavily into the saddle. He would stop by the Bar Diamond and pick up his duffle. Then the long, dusty trail again.

The stranger who had called his old monicker, there at the dance, had followed him, and now the man hailed him again.

"Won't you listen—jest for a second?" the man begged.

Steve frowned. "Make it snappy."

"It's for a woman," the man said. "Come on, we'll slip into this all-night lunch, where we can talk."

Steve followed. The man ordered cigars and coffee for the two of them, and they put their heads together.

"I didn't spot you, myself," the man went on. "I'm a lawyer. Jones is my name. I was over at the sheriff's office to see about bail for some of those fellows you ran in, this afternoon. One of 'em recognized you from San Quentin, and I don't mind saying he gave me your name hoping to do you dirt. But that isn't the reason I called you."

Steve frowned nervously. He was impatient to be on his way. It was only this talk of helping a woman which had led him thus far. He was chivalrous, Steve.

"It's a matter of some letters," the man went on. "My daughter'd like to get 'em back before she gets married. And this guy that has 'em threatens to get nasty with 'em."

"He's blackmailing you, in other words?"

"Holding the letters for ten thousand dollars," said Jones. "Now I'll pay you a thousand if you can get 'em. You see I've got to go to a man like you. I can't put the sheriff onto the job without telling him why. If I tell him—well, that's no help to Alice."

Steve studied his man carefully.

"Why don't you pull the robbery, yourself?"

Jones laughed nervously. "Suppose I were recognized? I'm pretty well known around here. Also—well, to tell you the truth, I'm scared to death of the job. It's so outside my line."

Steve thanked him for the implied tribute to his own courage. Abruptly, he stiffened. "It doesn't interest me," he said.

"Two thousand, then?"

"It's not the price," said Steve, "it's the principle of the thing. I'm through. Understand?"

Jones did not at once press him further. He smoked thoughtfully and stared at the table. Then he lifted a saddened face.

"If you want to talk principles," he said, "listen to me. You don't know what it is to be a father. But maybe you've loved a girl at some time or other in your life."

Steve felt a sharp stab at his heart.

"If you have," Jones went on, "then maybe you'll realize what it would mean to have that girl suffer. Don't you see it?"

It was Steve's turn, now, to stare at the table top.

"You know the hang of this robbery business," the man went on; "Heaven

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itself, must have sent you over here."

Steve looked up. Yes, he knew what it was to love, and what it would mean if the loved one were to suffer.

"I'll do it," he said grimly, "but I won't touch a cent for it. Understand? Not a cent. Now tell me about it."

Jones at once explained.

"The letters are in a desk drawer, out at this man's ranch. Sealed up in two large Manila envelopes. I know, because I saw him put them there, yesterday. I'd gone out there with five thousand dollars but we couldn't come to terms, and he put them away again."

"And the ranch is where?"

"South of town a piece. I'll take you out there, to-morrow night. Things oughta be quiet, Sunday. I'll wait at the gate while you go in."

Steve agreed, silently. Jones arose and wrung his hand in gratitude. Steve felt a warm little shiver go through his body. If his knowledge of evil could at last be turned to good—he smiled—then he didn't mind the risk he ran.

Jones advised him to pack a gun, but he shook his head.

"That's one thing I won't do."

Yet in spite of the risk, it was a calm enough Steve Cheyne who left his pony in the shadow of a saddle shed, late the following night. And an equally calm Steve who crossed the patch of pale moonlight to the house.

Windows and doors were all locked as Jones had said they would be. Natural enough if the man were suspecting such an attempt.

Steve worked quietly. He chose a door, preferring to jimmy wood than to shatter glass. The latch yielded, but a loose chain still held. He could not reach far enough inside to slip it, but he had come prepared. A few minutes with a hack saw, and he was in the room. He knew his layout, because Jones had drawn him a floor plan. He walked straight to the desk and repeated under his breath: "Second drawer—right." This, too, was locked, but the lock yielded in its turn.

Steve smiled a little grimly. It was the first job he had ever really pulled. In the dead days of the outgrown past, he would have been simply a nervous prowler. Now, his nerves were calm. Three years' time to think and the kindness of Father O'Hara had done that. He was a man, now—a man for good. The surety of it overwhelmed him.

He paused, however, as he put his hands on the Manila envelopes. Some sixth sense told him that he was no longer alone!

Trapped—without a rod!

As he stood there absolutely still for a long, long moment, nothing happened. He was more or less in the moonlight which streaked in the window. He would have been seen had his sixth sense told him correctly. So therefore, when all remained calm, he took it for granted that this premonition had been a false alarm.

He slipped the two envelopes into his shirt and tiptoed out. He waited another long moment in the shadows, before he went to his pony. Still no movement from the house. He did not know that the door on the other side had opened noiselessly. He was in his saddle in a second, but it became evident, almost immediately, that he was being pursued. He heard the tattoo of hoofs hard upon him, and without looking back, he hunched lower over the horse's neck.

Then came the shot. Hot fire seared his leg. Convulsive pain shot up to the groin. He felt himself falling—fainting.

Steve Cheyne came to, a few minutes later, with his head in a girl's lap. Soft fingers were stroking his forehead. Ginger's voice was saying, "Steve, why did you do it?" Before he could answer, she was going on, half sobbing. "We—we all knew you'd been an outlaw, of course. Brady told us, to-day. He'd been suspicious of you, you see. Afraid you were a recruit for the tough gang on his ranch. He'd started to look you up before you distinguished yourself, and the answer to his letter

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arrived to-day, sent by special delivery.

"But—but we'd all decided, Dad and Brady and I, that it didn't matter. Father O'Hara wrote so glowingly of you. And you'd been so wonderful, here. We—we thought you were a man, now."

Weakly, he struggled for words which failed to come.

"If you need some money," Ginger's soft voice went on, "why dion't you tell me? Dad would have lent you some."

"Money?" he managed to stammer.

Ginger ripped open one of the Manila envelopes. "Here," she said, presenting him a couple of large bills, "take what you need. And—and if you're not hurt too badly, maybe I can hide you till you can get away. I'll tell Dad the other fellow was working alone."

For a second, Steve felt giddy. Love like this was not given to every man—that she should feel for him and try to help him even when she thought he was an outlaw, was too much.

He managed to push the bills aside.

"Where—where is the other fellow?" he demanded, suddenly trying to rise. His mind surged wildly with the desire to get into the saddle, to ride, to bring the smooth-spoken Jones back to justice.

"He's over there," said Ginger. She pointed to a prone figure, face down in the sand. "I got him," she said, "just as he shot you. A second too late to save you altogether, but in time to spoil his aim a little."

Intelligences were coming almost too fast for Steve to comprehend them all.

"You got him," he repeated, dully, "jest as he shot me."

"Got him with a rock," said Ginger. "You see when I trailed you out of the house, I didn't stop for a gun. I—I didn't want to have to use one on you."

He began to understand it all, now.

He understood it better when Ginger rolled his double-crossing partner over, and took a look at his face.

"Spud Eastland," the girl gasped. "I—I see now why he paid Dad in cash instead of a check for those cows he bought. And why he waited till after the bank had closed, Saturday noon, to give him his money. He was planning all the time to rob it back."

Steve saw it, too—saw that the man had doubtless made arrangements, first, with the gang in Cedar Creek Canyon, and that when they had been run in, he had used their information to tackle Steve.

He realized then, also, why the man had shot. He had recognized Ginger in pursuit, and had striven to save his own face, to appear a rescuer in the nick of time.

Ginger was studying him intently.

"Steve," she challenged, "there's something queer about this. You didn't set out deliberately to rob us, I know."

Her faith thrilled him, but it frightened him, also. He struggled to get to his feet.

"I—I reckon I'd better be driftin'," he said.

As he said it, he fell back. The leg was useless. Ginger gathered him into her arms.

"By the looks o' that wound," she said, gently, "you won't be driftin' anywhere for a long time. If——if you don't feel strong enough to tell me about it, now, you can wait."

He opened his mouth to say something before it was too late, before her loveliness rendered him completely helpless, but Ginger cautioned him to silence.

"Not now," she said, "I can trust you. Don't you know, Steve, your eyes are all the proof I need?"

Then as those eyes of his still worshiped and wondered at love so great, she bent her face to his, and kissed him.

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Three Points Faster'n Lightnin'

By A. L. H. Bucklin

A cowboy who shoots with both eyes open will sometimes refrain from squinting when love comes his way. And this one just shut both eyes and opened his arms plumb wide.

CHAPTER I

A Cowboy Afoot

TOWARD sundown Flash Durkin jingled along the pitch-spewing board sidewalk of Main Street. He carried a heavy stock saddle in one hand, bridle slung over the horn. A 30-30 rifle was snuggled in the crook of his free arm; from a tied-down holster at his right hip the worn walnut butt of a six-gun protruded. In the high crown of his alkali-gray ten-gallon hat one bullet hole gaped.

From head to foot he was covered with powdery dust. The grime of his face was streaked by trickles of perspiration. His every movement attested that he was dog-tired. Apparently he had walked a long way. He came into Sagebrush from the direction of the Badlands, a region seldom traversed afoot.

A cowboy afoot!

Czar Lumley, tilted back in his chair on the porch of the Brunswick House, peered hard at the approaching cowpoke, spat a nicotine jet, scowled and rumbled, "It's him all right. Squeaky musta got tangled up somehow." He broke off suddenly at the sound of heavy feet.

Sheriff Amos Biggs who had just dined well, it seemed, strode to the porch, picking his teeth with the small blade of his knife.

Flash clumped up the hotel steps, put down his saddle and rifle, wiped perspiration from his face with the back of a work-calloused hand, then glanced at Czar Lumley and the sheriff.

The silence throbbed. The sheriff's eyes took in the saddle, the rifle, the bullet hole in Flash's hat. He half closed the blade of the knife and asked, "What's happened, stranger?

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I'm the sheriff so you're talkin' to the law."

Flash smiled good-naturedly and his cold eyes returned Czar Lumley's hostile stare.

"Over Devil's Canyon way some jasper cracks down on me as I was ridin' along peaceable. Shore got to be thankful to the gods of poor shootin'. First shot plunks through my hat. The second kills my hoss. My buckskin was a right good hoss, too, Sheriff. Best cuttin' hoss I ever owned, s'fact."

The sheriff stopped picking his teeth, flipped the blade shut and pocketed his knife. "'Pears like someone was anxious to keep you from arrivin' here."

"Strikes me thataway. But I don't see why anyone would bang away at me in these parts. Never been here; haven't an enemy so far as I know. Course Old Man Freeland told me as how some of the range riders would likely throw lead at me, soon as they knew I was the new foreman of the Lazy J. But shucks!"

Czar Lumley laughed gratingly. "This country seems right hot for Lazy J foremen. Last feller, name of Miller, was potted by rustlers."

The sheriff said, "I investigated that killin' and as near as I can make out, it wasn't rustlers got Miller."

"Huh," Czar grunted.

"How come?" Flash asked.

"Just can't say offhand who or what or why. But it wasn't rustlers," Biggs persisted. He amplified, "That Piñon Mesa country is plumb lawless. Just here the other day the sheepman's daughter, Helen Peters, come a-foggin' in for protection for her dad. Seems like his life and his sheep have been threatened. Cowmen want the range, she says."

"I wouldn't put no stock in a frightened gal's story, Sheriff," Czar rumbled. "Likely she just went loco and said things that ain't true at all."

"Must of been somethin' behind her story," Biggs asserted.

Czar's lips snarled away from yellow teeth. "Course I know how it is. It's kinda nice to be able to believe what a purty gal says; eh, Sheriff?"

"How far is the Lazy J from here?" Flash asked.

"Maybe eighteen or twenty miles," the sheriff opined.

"Sixteen by the short cut," Czar stated.

"This here is Czar Lumley and he runs a bunch of cows up thataway, Turkeytrack Z. He can probably tell you what you want to know about the layout," the sheriff vouchsafed.

"Know anything about my outfit?" Flash asked the cowman.

"Plenty," Czar said, his eyes narrow slits. "And none of it's good," he added.

Flash shifted weight from one booted foot to the other. "Reckon yore information checks against mine. I hear they haven't had a calf crop in two years and that rustlers are plumb bad and—"

"Can't say as to them things," Czar declared.

Flash seemed not to hear the cowman's words. "The dope I get is that rustler spies are in the bunkhouse."

The conversation broke off as a towheaded freckled-faced youngster, perhaps fourteen or fifteen years old, came up the steps to the hotel porch.

"By cracky," the sheriff ejaculated, "you're in luck, stranger. This here is Paul Freeland, son of the old man. He come in with a buckboard for supplies, so you won't have to walk out."

"Hello, Paul," Flash greeted, extending his hand to the boy. "I'm Flash Durkin."

"Glad to meet you," Paul said and little flickers of admiration danced in his eyes. "Dad wrote you were comin'."

Paul's eyes appraised the new foreman. He was tall and lean and slim-waisted, his face bronzed by sun and wind, his hair faded by hot sunlight, eyes cool and steady, chin firm and square.

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"You shoot any at the hombre who waylaid you?" the sheriff inquired casually, tugging at his mustache with a lean hand.

"I threw a little lead his way, but he was crouched down behind a boulder up on the rimrock and he wasn't much of a target. Besides, he was purty far away for a six-gun and this rifle was under my dead hoss."

"Did you get a look at the feller?" Paul wanted to know.

"Reckon I could spot him again, sonny. He was purty chunky and he wore black woolly chaps."

"I wouldn't be describin' no one promiscous," Czar said. "That description might fit several hereabouts and it'll make bad feelings."

"No one has to put it on less'n it fits him snug."

A silence hammered at the group on the porch. Czar pulled out a sack of "makings" and built a cigarette, stuck it in his mouth, lighted it on the flare of a match.

"Durkin, you're headin' for a country of trouble," the sheriff said. "If you aren't fast on the draw, it's no place for you. Killin' and fightin' and rustlin' and plottin'; Violence Range, that's what it is. I'd take charge up there personal, only there's a lot of matters needin' my attention down here."

"Thanks, Sheriff, but I don't figure to need yore help."

Czar laughed gratingly.

Flash turned to Paul. "When can we hit the trail for the outfit, son?" he asked. "If things are as bad as they're pictured, we oughtn't to lose any time."

"We'd better stay in town to-night and get goin' at dawn to-morrow. I've got the supplies loaded on the buckboard."

The sheriff spoke again. "You don't aim to go up to the mesa without some of the Lazy J rannies ridin' with you?"

"Shore, why not?"

"Don't do it. That country's plumb pizen to a Lazy J foreman."

Flash's eyes rested on Czar, bored into him, then shifted to the sheriff. "Me and Paul'll go ahead with our original plan," he decided.

"By cracky," Amos Biggs exclaimed, "another job for the coroner."

Flash wasn't sure what the sheriff's attitude meant. He didn't want to leave any doubt as to where he stood. "Jus' so there won't be no misunderstandin', I'm a-tellin' yuh right now that I come in to run the Lazy J, not to be run out of the country. I aim to raise a few calves and to stop the rustlers raidin' Lazy J critters."

"You've tackled a stiff job, stranger," Czar said, puffing hard on his cigarette.

Flash held the cowman with cool eyes. "Tough jobs is my meat," he said. "Looks like I'm goin' to enjoy myself huge." Then to Paul he said, "Come on, sonny, let's turn in. If it's goin' to be as bad to-morrow as our friends point out, we'll need some sleep to steady our nerves."

Man and boy turned in at the dining room door. "Feel real gaunt," Flash opined. "Come to think her over, I missed one meal, a'ready."

CHAPTER II

The Killer on the Cliff

IN the gray dawn Paul swung his frisky broncs in toward the Brunswick House while Flash clumped down the steps and piled into the buckboard.

He slung his .30-30 rifle at the back of the seat and laid his six-gun between Paul and himself, then gathered up the lines and clucked to the iron-hard range horses. They broke into a wild run, tugging the mountain wagon by the bits. Careening, bumping, the buckboard tore along the twisting ribbon of dust that wound up and ever upward toward the tip-top of the world. Behind the rig swirled a billowing cloud of choking dirt. They quitted the low country and climbed into a region of mesa land over which hung a penetrating chill. Snow-capped peaks loomed ahead.

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With Paul giving directions, they forded a river, swollen to flood with melting snow waters. In mid-stream the water boiled into the box of the buckboard. The broncs plunged in fear and tried to tangle up the harness. Flash drove them masterfully and presently brought them into shallower water; the wild horses struggled up on the farther bank. Scraggly cedars grew along the road. After a time these gave way to aspens and oaks and clumps of sarvus brush; in turn these were replaced by stately pines and symmetrical spruce trees. The newborn sun touched their evergreen with glory.

The broncs slowed to a walk now as the road climbed straight up through a canyon of jagged rocks. Creak of harness, rattle of buckboard, clop-clop of hoofs, and an occasional word broke the mountain stillness. The wind was scented with aromatic balsam. Below, in the valley, a surging creek raced onward. A magpie mocked the two humans from the security of a tree. On a lava ledge rattlesnakes sunned themselves and as the Lazy J rig creaked by they reared ugly diamond-shaped heads atop their coils, rattles vibrating a warning.

Suddenly Flash's six-gun seemed to leap from the seat to his hand and it spouted fire. Bang! Bang! Bang! Three snake heads flew off.

The broncs reared and pitched, began to run. Flash laughed at the frightened horses, wrapped the lines around his hands, and after a time tugged the bolting animals to a slow pace. He handed the "ribbons" to Paul and reloaded his gun.

"May need her, later," he explained to the boy.

Flecks of admiration danced in Paul's eyes. "Gosh," he said, "I didn't see you pick up that gun and shoot. Why—why you're just three points faster'n lightnin'." Amazement was on Paul's face as he went on, "You didn't close your eye to aim, did you?"

Flash laughed good-naturedly. "Nope, never do, Paul. That squintin' of an eye is plumb waste of time."

The deeply rutted road traversed a mesa land of verdant grama grass. Here sleek cattle grazed. As the buckboard rattled by, some of the cow brutes lifted ugly heads to sniff the air and gave expression to their disturbed feelings by raucous bawlings that seemed to shake the mountains to their very foundations. For a space the road dropped down into a gloom-shrouded canyon. On both sides great cliffs of red sandstone reared. Flash glanced up a bit apprehensively.

"Shore ain't a good place to meet up with an enemy," he mused aloud.

The staccato rat-a-tat-tat of fast running horse's hoofs beat out. Then around a bend raced a rangy sorrel. A girl, with masses of blue-black hair flying back of her in a cloud, sat the saddle. She drew her horse to a skidding stop as the buckboard came abreast, and raised her hand.

Flash noted in a quick glance that her white cheeks were stained a delectable red by the action of wind and the exercise of riding. Her lips were warm and crimson; her eyes were deep and mysterious. This girl was alive, radiant, glowing.

He tugged the broncs to a stop. But they wouldn't stand still. They pranced and jumped, strained at the harness.

"Hello, Helen," Paul greeted.

"Hello, Paul."

Flash straightened in his seat. The girl's voice held the quality of music.

The girl burst out, "Don't go any farther."

"But we gotta be gettin' to the Lazy J," Flash protested, his eyes held strangely by the eyes of the girl whom Paul had called Helen.

"If you plan to get there sound, turn around. Someone is skulking up on the rimrock a mile ahead. I couldn't see the man, but I saw his horse hidden in a thicket."

"Maybe yo're just imagining things. At any rate we gotta travel this road to the outfit."

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"There's an old little-used road that winds through Sunshine Valley and finally reaches the ranch. It's a good deal farther, but maybe we'd better take it," Paul volunteered.

Helen looked at Flash, dropped her eyes and said, "I suppose you're the new foreman for the Lazy J."

"Yeah, reckon that's my job," he said and smiled.

She nodded her head understandingly. "That explains the sniper on the cliff, then. Czar Lumley won't let you take charge if he can help it."

"I met him last night in Sagebrush," Flash said. "He didn't seem overly cordial, s'fact, but that don't mean a thing."

"Yes," Helen went on, "it's all plain now. The black horse I saw in the thicket just now is the top horse of Squeaky Phipps. He's Lumley's foreman, does his dirty work, mostly. Phipps drilled Miller from behind, though of course it can't be proved."

"Just why would Lumley and Phipps want to keep me from reaching the Lazy J?"

She flung out her arms, imploringly. "These men want Piñon Mesa for the Turkeytrack Z. They're bent on destroying other cow outfits. They plan to kill my father's sheep."

"We better be gettin' along, Paul," Flash said calmly and took a firmer hold on the lines. "If these jaspers want to keep me from the outfit this bad, there must be a good reason for me gettin' there, pronto."

"But Phipps'll have the drop on us if we drive along this road," Paul objected.

"When the shootin' starts, you drop off the rig. I'll come back and pick you up when I finished the little fracas with the gunman up above."

Flash loosened the rifle from the back of the seat, saying, "May need it for long-range work."

"Please Mr.—Mr.—"

"Call me Flash," he suggested.

"This Phipps is a cold-blooded killer. He won't give you a chance. Turn around and take the old road."

Flash considered this advice for a long minute. He thrilled to the evident concern for his safety in the girl's voice. Of course it wasn't a personal matter. But Helen's voice did strange things to him.

He took off his ten-gallon hat and scratched his head reflectively. "Reckon maybe yo're plumb right. Ain't playin' square to let Paul in for a gunfight. Anyway, I promised his dad to ride herd on him a bit."

An insect buzzed in the grass to the side of the road.

"How's Mr. Freeland getting along?" Helen asked.

"Figures to be out of the hospital in two weeks. He's mendin' right fast. But he was shot up bad," answered Paul.

Helen's face sobered. "That was more of Czar Lumley's dirty work," she charged.

Flash smiled and rubbed his big hand across his forehead. "Me—I'm a-goin' to like this country fine," he enthused. "It'll be a right good range when we break up these rustlers and say a purty little piece to Lumley and his gunman Phipps. I always says no country's perfect, but we can do our best to make it nice."

For the first time Helen saw the bullet hole in Flash's hat. She leaned forward in the saddle, biting off her words sharply. "They've tried to ambush you already," she cried.

Flash fidgeted with the ends of his neckerchief. "No, ma'am, I wouldn't go so far as to say that. Might have been just a stray piece of lead, floatin' around, static-like." His face grew animated as if a new idea struck him hard and pleasurably. "Where yuh livin' up here, Miss—"

"My name is Helen," she explained and color touched her cheeks. "My dad's sheep camp is about five miles west of the Lazy J."

"Country ain't bad a-tall," Flash opined and smiled up at Helen boyishly. "We're neighbors. Won't be

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no trick a-tall for me to ride over and say howdy now and then, that is if sheep folks don't hate cow waddies plumb venomous."

Eagerness was in her expression. Then she regarded the gravel of the road, her face sobering. "I'd love to have you ride over, but Dad—Dad is queer. He hates cows and cowpunchers."

"Maybe I can convince him that a cowboy is almost human. I'd do a heap of talkin' so I can see you regular."

Jamboree Creek murmured a soothing lullaby. The high country seemed to hold its breath under the smarting heat of noonday.

Flash said after a time, "I'm thankin' yuh, Helen, for tippin' us off about this feller on the rimrock. Shootin' at me, he might have hurt Paul bad."

For a long moment Flash and Helen looked into each other's eyes. Then Helen touched her horse with gentle spurs and Flash swung the broncs around and headed back for the old road.

CHAPTER III

Against Rustlers, Alone

RIDING circle, Flash drew up his horse and gazed down the trail. A cayuse was tearing at him on a run. Atop the horse was a girl. Before she came within his vision range distinctly he sensed that Helen was the hurrying rider. He spurred forward toward her.

Her color was high and her long blue-black hair trailed behind her on the wind.

She drew up and cried, "There are four men branding calves in the box-canyon to the east." She indicated with a graceful arm.

Flash's lips gripped each other hard. "Reckon the stuff was once Lazy J."

"I'm afraid so," Helen admitted.

"Thanks, Helen, I'll see yuh later. Just now I got business in that box-canyon."

He whirled his horse and set out on a high run.

For a moment she could not comprehend what he planned to do. It was suicide to ride into the canyon against the rustlers, alone. He'd be killed without mercy. She tried to cry out to halt him, but no words came from her lips. She sat her horse paralyzed by the thought that harm would come to Flash. She raced her horse toward the Lazy J, her plan being to gather as many riders as possible and hurry to Flash's help. It never occurred to her that the waddies would be out riding range.

Flash, as he neared the box-canyon, perceived a little spiral of smoke wafting straight up in the still air. That'd mean a branding fire. Pell-mell he rode, literally hurling his mount forward, as he passed several Lazy J cows, bawling mournfully.

"Lost their calves," he summed up.

He decided to approach the box-canyon from the top where he could ride to the lip of the granite wall, then, afoot, ease down the cliff, and surprise the rustlers at work. An inspection of his six-gun in its tied-down holster was made. As he felt along his cartridge belt he grinned, assured that his smoke-wagon was in first-class order, and that his belt held plenty of amunition.

Flash came out at the top of the canyon, stepped to the ground, and his eyes swept the gorge below. Four men were about a fire. Two were throwing a calf down, a third picked up a running iron and laid it on the critter's hide. A high-pitched bawling sounded, almost like a human scream. Faintly, words drifted up to him. Quickly he tied his horse to a sapling, walked to the edge of the drop and began crawling down. It was slow work and dangerous. In his progress down the cliff it was necessary to sacrifice speed in the interest of silence. He must not apprize the rustlers of his approach. A rolling stone might direct a volley of lead at him as he hung between earth and sky. Much of the way he clung grimly, supporting the

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entire weight of his body by one arm while he hacked with his knife a little toe hold or a hand hold. Once a small bush gave way and he went tumbling down, grasping an outjutting ledge and barely saving himself from death on the boulders below.

After as grueling a few minutes as he had ever lived he gained the canyon floor and paused to catch his breath. Cautiously he struck out toward the branding crew. He took care that he should not snap a twig, nor swish against a tree or bush by keeping behind a fringe of sheltering trees as best he could. Within a hundred yards of the rustler quartet he stepped into the open and charged them at a run, his six-gun in his hand, ready.

His quick eyes took in the scene. Czar Lumley was in charge of operations and if the description held true, one of the rustlers was Squeaky Phipps. At all events he had seen this chunky man of the black woolly chaps the day he was set afoot in Devil's Canyon.

Czar glanced up, saw Flash, and bellowed, "Get him, Squeaky." In that instant the chunky man's hand flashed down and up. A gun gleamed in the light. But Flash's six-gun barked raucously and Squeaky's gun went clattering to the ground while the gunman clapped his uninjured hand to his bleeding wrist.

Wild rage rioted in Squeaky's voice as he yowled, "I'll get you for that, you coyote. What right you got to crack down on a feller who's brandin' his calves?"

Flash laughed good-naturedly. "Yuh needn't get so peeved, Squeaky. It's kinda tit for tat. You had a shot comin'. Yuh took a pot-shot at me as I rode into this here country. No way to welcome a stranger."

Flash kept the four men covered while he invited, "If any of yuh crave busted wrists just go for yore guns. Seems like yuh made a right grave mistake. Can't yuh figure, none of yuh? Must be plumb loco. These here critters yo're brandin' is Lazy J stuff."

"That's a lie. We come upon some of our own calves here and we—"

"Save yore breath, Czar. Quite a few Lazy J cows is lamentin' up thataway, and I never heard a cow brute bawlin' 'cause some other cow lost her calf."

Czar's hand streaked for his gun.

"Wouldn't do no rash thing," Flash warned. "Course I can bust your wrist complete, too."

The cowman, his face twisted by insane rage, drew his hand away from his gun butt. "You'll get paid for this. I'll get you if it takes ten years."

"Wouldn't shoot yore mouth off thataway, Czar. A rustler's promise ain't worth much."

"Who says I'm a rustler?" Czar rumbled.

"I say yuh are. It can't be proved. Yuh say these here calves are yore stuff. I say they're Lazy J. Neither of us can prove nothin' in court. Just the same, I know yuh for what yuh are."

"If you didn't have a gun on me, I'd make you eat your lyin' words."

Flash didn't reply. Instead he ordered, "Yuh jaspers get aboard yore hosses and drift, pronto. First though, yuh unbuckle yore gunbelts and drop 'em on the ground."

Snarls, growls, threats went up from the four. But they complied with the command. Apparently no one of them wanted to hear Flash's gun bark again.

Flash went on, dominating the situation by his gun and by his flaming courage, "So we won't be elbowin' one another in our departure, yuh jaspers drift down canyon. I know it'll take yuh over Lazy J acres, but yuh can pass this once. Howsomever, all of yuh better come a-shootin' if yuh ever ride back."

Czar and his gang mounted, headed down the canyon. Czar turned in the saddle and said, "You got us this time, foul, but the play ain't run out complete. You'll despise the day you tangled with us."

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"Drift," Flash spat, his gun emphasizing his order.

The quartet rode away.

Flash called, "I'll send yore guns over to yuh later."

Scarcely had Czar and his men disappeared from view when two horses pounded up the canyon, bee-lining for Flash. Helen rode one, Paul topped the other.

Helen seemed to go weak at sight of Flash. A vast relief was in her face as she said, "They didn't kill you." A caress was in her words and a suspicious moisture was in her eyes.

"Seems like you could count me in on any excitement. You go ridin' away and never say a word—" Paul began.

"Sonny, the jaspers I've been talkin' to ain't fit for yuh to meet up with. Tell yuh what yuh can do to help me. Haze these calves down to the corral by the house."

Helen's lips were trembling as she exclaimed, "You drove off Czar and Squeaky and the rest, alone, single-handed."

Flash's eyes and Helen's met and held.

"Well, not me alone," he said, ill at ease. "Me and my gun, yuh might say."

Later, burdened with an odd assortment of gunbelts and six-shooters, Flash climbed slowly up the cliff to his horse, Paul shoved the calves to the home ranch corral, while Helen spurred for the sheep camp of her father.

CHAPTER IV

A Plot Is Cooked

AS Flash rode down the trail to the camp of Woolly Peters he heard voices raised high in argument; a gruff voice that seemed to slice through the cool night and a voice that spoke a strange admixture of English and Spanish.

"You're fired right on the spot, Pedro. I've been watching you, sneaking around with the cow crowd, plotting with 'em, and helping 'em out in their devilment."

"The señor ees wrong. Eet ees these sheep what I love."

"You're a dirty Mex, Pedro. You'd take my money and slit my throat for the fun of it."

"But no, eet ees not the Mexican blood that flow in my veins. It is pure Castilian. As for thees throat slit, I herd the sheep faithful."

"Dry up and get out. No fellow who talks confidential with Czar Lumley and his hired killer is on my payroll."

"Eet ees true that I speak with this men, but only of a private matter. You were not discussed, señor. I call upon the saints to bear me witness."

"Private matter, bah! Likely you were dickering with those crooks to drive the woollies over a cliff. You're so full of hooch right now, you'd kill the sheep or me for a dollar."

"Eet ees the cruel word you speak, señor. Still I go, only you have paid me less than half what I have earn by watching the sheep. As for the aguardiente I have thees two little drink. So you see—"

"Get out or I'll throw you out."

At this precise moment Flash clattered into the yard, jumped down, threw the reins over his horse's head, clumped to the door, spurs jingling musically, and knocked.

Helen opened the door and stood very still, drawing in her breath. Her eyes were upon Flash's face and they were warm and glowing. Yet in them were little pin points of fear. She managed to say softly, "You shouldn't have come."

"Ah, I'll explain things to yore father."

Peters, evidently having terminated the interview with his one-time herder, appeared beside Flash and Helen. Slowly he looked Flash over, from the dented crown of his ten-gallon hat to the toes of his fancy-stitched boots.

"Cowman, huh?" he snorted. "And what brings you here?" In his tone was bitter hostility.

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"I'm Flash Durkin, foreman of the LazyJ. Twice your daughter has done me a service and I thought—"

"She did you a service, eh?" Peters shot out. "Then, sure enough, she didn't know you were a cowman."

"But, Father, Flash is different. He—"

"Oh, that's it," Peters rasped. "All right, that bein' the case you just turn around and make tracks out of here. A cowman doesn't have business in a sheep camp." He sniffed the air contemptuously, wrinkling up his bulbous nose. "Thought the air was polluted," he insulted. "Now you make tracks, live up to your name, moving away."

Flash hooked his thumbs in his belt. He seemed to choose his words carefully, holding his hot temper in check. "Listen, Peters, I didn't come over here to start trouble. I'm here as a friend. I'm forgettin' that I run critters or that yuh herd sheep. I came over—"

"Don't care how or why you come. What I'm interested in is your leaving and leaving fast."

"Father, Flash is a friend," Helen said warmly. "He's lined up against the same enemies you are fighting. Instead of abusing him you should throw in with him, work together."

Peter's lips curled. "I don't have to call in cowfolks to fight my battles," he said surlily.

An uneasy pause fell. Off in the mountains a wolf boomed its chilling call.

The sheepman saw Flash's gun in his tied-down holster. "Cocky, ain't you? I see you come on this friendly visit, heeled."

Peters stepped inside the cabin. A chain rattled, a catch snapped and then he was at the door again, holding a vicious growling dog by the collar. The beast was a fearsome sight, seemingly gone mad, lips slathering, and teeth, as sharp as needle points, set off by red-bordered drawn-back lips.

The sheepman seemed to catch the dog's mood. "Get off the place fast or I'm turning Pluto loose. He jumps straight for the throat. You may be fast with a gun, but you haven't a ghost of a chance. Get off and don't come back ever."

Flash took things calmly. He said, "Peters, I love dogs. I'd hate plumb bad to have to kill that hound of yores. For Helen's sake, I'm goin'."

"Stop dragging her name into this," Peters shouted. "She's my daughter and not to be spoken of by you, a cowpoke. Savvy that? You ain't fit to speak her name."

"Reckon yo're plumb right about that. I don't claim to be much only—"

"I'm counting three," Peters interrupted, "and then I turn Pluto loose."

The vicious animal, a horrible growl welling from its ugly throat, strained to leap free, body trembling, eyes filmed with madness.

"That'd be murder, Dad, plain murder," Helen suggested. "You know that Pluto will kill."

"Any cowpoke messing in a sheep-camp ought to be killed. He's a cattle spy in here to get the lay of things."

For a moment Flash lost his good nature. "If I was yuh, Peters," he said, and his words crackled with feeling, "I wouldn't threaten folks 'cause yuh might cross the wrong jasper and yuh'd step in the way of a hunk of hot lead."

Peters fairly foamed in anger. He loosed Pluto's collar. The beast leaped free—almost. As he sprang, Helen's quick hand darted down, seized the dog by the scruff of his neck, and held on. She clamped her other hand around the collar. Into the yard the dog dragged her, but exerting every ounce of her strength she finally brought the beast to a stand, a scant two feet from Flash.

The Lazy J foreman was already striding toward his horse. "See yuh some other time, Helen," he promised, and swung up in the stirrup. He sent his horse down the path to the mountain trail.

For a few moments he rode, dizzily,

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his head throbbing with a chaos of thoughts. Then his chin came up and his eyes probed the night. The sound of galloping hoofs came to his ears. Not far ahead a horseman spurred at top speed. Flash tried to identify the lone rider, but the moonlight did not fully reveal him. The shadows of the pines lay across the way, making the rider tall, then short, thin, then fat.

At any rate, Flash concluded, the horseman was a cowpoke. He sat the saddle as an integral part of his mount. Flash unconsciously shifted his holster so that the worn walnut butt of his gun would be ready to hand should any occasion to use it arise. He kept the rider ahead in sight. As he watched, another horseman swung in beside the first.

For a time Flash studied this second rider. "He don't set his saddle like a cowpoke. This feller ain't used to peelin' a bronc."

Words drifted back to Flash.

"Señor, he ees very cruel to Pedro. He ees refuse to pay thees money I work so hard in the hot sun for. He say I talk to you, so no more am I worthy to herd the sheep. Also he say I am what you call, intoxicate."

"The old tarantula," the first rider rumbled.

In that instant Flash knew who the horsemen were. Only one man in the range country had a rumbling voice that could compete with the thunder. This man was Czar Lumley. The other rider of course was Pedro, the herder Woolly Peters had discharged a few minutes ago.

Czar rumbled, "You and me's got work to-night, Pedro. Hum, so he wouldn't pay you."

"I swear by the saints—"

"Mex, how'd you like to grab five hundred bucks, easy, by settlin' your own grudge?"

"The five hundred *duros* of the *Estados Unidos! Si, señor,* Pedro do a lot for thees money. Eet ees life to me. I am, what you say, *uno pobrecito.* Eet ees the gran' fortune for me. Weeth thees *oro* I become the *caballero, muy fino.* No?"

Czar suggested, "Don't talk so loud out here. We'll ride over to my house. Plans have a way of leaking out on this mesa since that damned Flash Durkin started proddin' the Lazy J. He's another we're goin' to take care of in our little deal."

"What do I have to do, Señor Lumley?"

"Right simple when you get the drift of things. I happen to know that Flash threatened to bump Woolly off—or about the same thing, a few minutes ago. Now all you have to do—" The voice trailed off.

A small boulder crashed down the mountain with a whirring and roaring. Flash's brows wrinkled in concentration. "What yuh s'pose them jaspers are cookin'?" he demanded of his horse. He rode slumped forward in the saddle, giving his horse his head. Presently he drew rein, took off his ten-gallon hat and scratched his head.

"Hoss, we're goin' to sashay round a bit. I'd bet every last dime I ever expect to have that Pedro'll come poundin' down this trail purty soon and he won't be travelin' for no good."

CHAPTER V

On a Gunman's Trail

RAIN slashed at the earth, thunder rumbled from peak to peak while white-hot lightning zigzagged sizzlingly along the horizon. The night grew ominously black with trees and cliffs a deeper dark, sinister in their outlines. High wind ripped at tree branches, howled shrilly through canyons and gorges. Under the impulse of the storm Jamboree Creek went wild, swelling to débris-laden flood in a few short minutes.

Flash took some cover from the storm under a pine tree, dismounting, and leading his horse to the sheltered side. At the very height of the storm he made out a rider sloshing from the direction of the Lazy J outfit. Who

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could this rider of the storm be? What vital business would take him out on the rangeland on such a night? The cowboy hoped that a streak of weaving lightning would disclose the rider. Lightning here and there burned holes in the night, but no flash illuminated the unidentified horseman.

All that Flash knew was that the fellow sat his horse awkwardly, jostled to this side and that, and bounced up and down. The horse's hoofs drummed above the shrieking of the wind, the rustle of swaying branches and the sibilant tapping of the rain. Why was this rider hurrying so and where was he bound?

The horseman left the main trail and headed down the path to the Peters' sheep camp. This was signal to Flash to leap into the saddle and send his horse running toward the Peters' cabin.

Events crowded fast one upon another.

The mysterious horseman was at the Peters' door, hammering. He set up a hallooing, "Peters, oh, Peters."

Presently the door was flung open and Peters stood there, clearly outlined by the blazing lightning.

Bang! Bang! A six-shooter in the mysterious rider's hand barked, spat fire, and Peters leaned forward, clutching at his chest, swayed back, and crumpled at the knees. He fell headlong, a crimson smear spreading on his nightshirt.

The horseman raced to his mount, swung up in the stirrup and lashed the animal out of the yard. He tore along the trail, bobbing up and down, perilously near to being jostled off.

Flash, tearing toward the sheep camp saw a racing smudge in the night. He dragged his six-gun and poured lead, both eyes wide open. But the speed of the two horses, the darkness, the rain, the disconcerting sheets of lightning, all served to upset his sure marksmanship. Every shot was a clean miss. For a minute he was undecided whether to follow the fleeing gunman or go to Peters' aid. Helen would perhaps need him. He sent his horse toward the sheep cabin, reined to a sliding stop, and jumped down. Through the open door he saw Helen drop to her knees beside her father, trying to lift his head, calling his name. Then Flash, six-gun in hand, stood in the doorway.

With a quick movement of her head, Helen glanced up and saw him. Her eyes seemed riveted on the gun in Flash's hand; her face blanched.

She exclaimed, "You—you?" Agony was in her tone.

Flash understood what she was thinking. "Gosh no, I didn't shoot yore dad. I tried to wing the feller who did as he was makin' his getaway."

"You couldn't—you're not that sort," she said with assurance. "Forgive me. You startled me with the gun and father being shot and all."

Flash examined the wound in Woolly Peters' chest.

"Let's get him on the bed," Flash suggested and picked up the unconscious sheepman in his arms as if he had been a little child. He laid him down on a cot, gently.

"We'll have to have some hot water," Flash told Helen and she went to heat it.

Flash worked, cleansing the bullet-wound, trying to restore consciousness to Peters, doing all things to make him easy. His hand, swift to streak to his gun, of a sudden turned soft and comforting. He had the touch of a woman. From his face it appeared that he was suffering with Peters, felt the throb of his wound, and was racked by his pain.

Flash straightened up from the bed, as he said awkwardly, "Reckon yore dad'll live. Me—I'm headin' after the dirty crook who potted him."

"You have an idea who fired at Dad?"

"I'll run him down right soon."

Helen came close, and touched the Lazy J foreman's arm. "Don't take any chance with this killer. I—I don't

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seem able to face these things alone."

His Adam's apple worked up and down. "Yuh'll never have to face a thing alone after this. Yuh—" He gulped, choked, sputtered. He couldn't express the thoughts that crowded his mind. His rush of emotion made him dumb. He clumped to the door.

Once outside he broke his gun and reloaded. Then he examined the hoofprints in the yard and picked out almost at once, those of the horse the would-be killer had ridden.

"Hum," he said aloud, "this'll make it plumb easy. The rain's softened the ground a bit and this here outflaring calk on the left hind hoof'll be plain."

He ran to his horse and climbed aboard.

The sudden fitful storm quieted as quickly as it had swept the rangeland. The rumble of thunder gradually died away; the lightning had spent itself, and the snarling wind was now a soft whisper. The moon struggled from a cloud bank. A few intrepid stars twinkling, giving an illusion of nearness.

Slowly Flash trailed the outflaring calk. He shook his head and told his horse, "Headin' for Czar Lumley's outfit, shore is."

A confusion of tracks crossed and recrossed at the forks of the trail just before reaching the Turkeytrack Z. He dismounted here and studied the hoof marks in the mud. The outflaring calk went up to Lumley's ranch, but here was a fresher print of the distinctive calk, he judged. It was going the other way. He bent over the tracks and trailed them into the south branching of the path. The killer, then, had gone to Czar Lumley, but had immediately turned around and high-tailed it south in the direction of Mexico and safety.

In memory Flash saw Czar and Pedro riding the trail, and heard their suggestive words. The Czar had offered, "Mex, how'd you like to grab five hundred bucks, easy, by settlin' your own grudge? I happen to know that Flash threatened to bump Woolly off. He's another we're goin' to take care of in our little deal."

What did it all mean?

"No use wastin' time trailin' this calk to the Turkeytrack Z," Flash decided aloud. "The feller I'm lookin' for is headed south and ridin' fast. Me—I'll take a little breeze down thataway myself."

He swung south. Sometimes he lost the calk prints, but always after some search he took up the trail again. Instinct seemed to guide him, for, despite the semi-darkness and stretches of rock that took no hoof imprints, he carried on. The wind sighed in the pines. Jamboree Creek roared through a gashlike canyon, frothing white, beating itself into lather in rock-studded rapids, whirling wildly in pools.

A mountain lion howled and the night shuddered.

Dawn touched the east with delicate pink and old rose. The outflaring calk marks, more easily discernible now, held south. Flash urged his horse to a faster pace. Worry lines creased his forehead. This would-be killer, from the stride of his horse, was traveling fast, much faster than Flash could. It was necessarily slow work following the outflaring calk. On the other hand the fugitive was burning the wind. This would-be murderer should not escape, for Flash resolved to keep after him doggedly until he ran him down, if it took the rest of his natural lifetime. The Lazy J foreman thought it odd that he should be so concerned about catching a man who had taken a shot at Peters. Fighting words had passed between Peters and him. Still, there was Helen to be considered.

Wild flowers grew in a riot of color along the trail. The evergreens were a blaze of splendor as the first rays of the rising sun touched their rain-splashed fronds. But Flash had no time nor inclination to enjoy the beauties of nature. He was tracking a killer.

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The trail toiled up the steep slopes of a mountain range, now and again twisting back upon itself, but in the main going forward, gaining altitude. Flash's heart pounded wildly at this extreme elevation. After an interminable time, the cowboy and his lathery mount reached the top of the world. He drew his horse to a stop and gazed off through the blue haze to the valley floor far below. On that valley floor a dot appeared and moved. His eyes probed the tiny shape. "Yep, hoss, that's a rider, goin' somewhere in a hurry. Reckon he's our man."

He twisted around in the saddle, looked back the way he had come so arduously, and deftly rolled a cigarette. Dots sprang up on the back trail, thousands of feet below. "One, two, three, four, five," he counted. "Five men ridin' thisaway. Wonder what's up? Maybe it's a posse after the jasper who threw lead. Right funny, though. Cow folks don't bother a lot about a sheepman."

Flash touched gentle spurs to his tired horse and clattered south after the speeding dot in the valley below.

The morning wore on. Flash judged that he was gaining on the rider ahead. He studied the hoof marks in a stretch of loose sand and concluded that the killer's horse was far spent. The animal was slowing down and wobbling in its stride. He caught sight of the fleeing rider for a brief moment. Then the horseman was hidden again by a twist of the trail. But in that short glimpse Flash noted the hard-ridden horse, nearing exhaustion, and the panicky rider who lashed with quirt and gouged with deep-biting rowels. The fugitive wore a high-crowned wide-brimmed Mexican style sombrero. It was Pedro who fled the law.

Flash spoke to his bronc, urging additional speed.

The region was a jumble of piled-up boulders where heat waves danced grotesquely. The waste was barren of growing vegetation. After a time Flash came out into a lower valley. Even here, barrenness held sway. It was a desert region, dotted by sagebrush and greasewood. A vulture wheeled in the white-hot sky.

The expanse was settled by prairie dogs. Their towns were everywhere—clusters of small burrows. The yellowish brown dogs sat beside their burrows, bolt upright like so many little posts, chattering metallically. It was dangerous going for horse and rider. The ground was honeycombed with prairie dog holes. To miss a burrow Flash now and again reined his bronc aside. A horse's leg plumping down in a dog hole would be broken like a pipe stem in a strong man's hand. The rider would be hurled down to serious injury.

Despite the menace of the prairie dog holes Flash jogged along at a fast clip. Pedro must be overtaken. He felt a little pity for Pedro as he judged him to be a poor ignorant Mexican, desperately hard up, tempted, and perhaps made crazy by liberal potions of Czar Lumley's moonshine liquor.

He rounded a shoulder of the mountain and saw ahead that a horse was down with a broken leg, trying vainly to rise; and farther off, evidently hurled over the animal's head in the fall, was Pedro, sprawled unnaturally, without movement. In that instant Flash forgot that Pedro was a potential killer. He saw him now as a suffering human being, badly hurt, not as a fugitive fleeing the law.

The cowboy put spurs to his bronc and dashed up to Pedro, stopped, and got down. He rolled Pedro over, and saw with a cursory glance that the man was stunned; perhaps he had suffered a slight concussion of the brain as his head battered into the rocky ground.

The injured horse tried to pull its leg from the prairie dog hole, squealing in fright and pain. Its left foreleg dangled. So quickly that eye could not follow the movement, Flash's hand went to his gun and the weapon belched fire. He scarcely seemed to aim. Both eyes open, he pointed his gun

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and shot from the hip. The horse sank down, mercifully out of its misery.

To the north side of the trail a clump of willow trees bordered a trout stream. Flash looked at the trees with their inviting shade, at the unconscious man, then gathered Pedro up in his arms and leading his bronc, made for the greenery. At the clump he tied his horse by grounding the reins, then ran to the creek and dipped up water in his ten-gallon hat. Returning to Pedro he set to work over him, bathing his temples, his wrists, and forcing a little water between his lips. The Mexican seemed to be out completely, but Flash persisted in his efforts.

After a time Pedro's eyelids twitched; he groaned; his body seemed to be racked by a convulsion; finally he opened his eyes and stared at the blue sky, unseeing. Consciousness came to the sheepherder when he turned his head and saw Flash.

Terror was in his face as he mouthed, "Mercy of God." He checked his words, tried to sit up, fell back and groaned in a wailing tone.

"Take her easy, old man," Flash counseled. "Yuh'll be as good as new in a jiffy."

Puzzlement twisted Pedro's face. "Why the Señor Flash try to help me?"

"No special reason. Yo're hurt plumb bad. Here take a drink."

The Mexican sipped the water.

"*Gracias, señor.* God attend you." He paused, clinging to consciousness with a great effort of will. "You are the vaquero and I, a sheepherder. I do not understand why you give me a drink."

"Aw, that's all hooey. What difference does it make what you or I do for a livin'? Yo're maybe human like a cowpoke and me—maybe I'm pretty much like a sheepherder."

"The señor have the heart of *oro.*"

"Yeah," Flash agreed, not understanding that *oro* is Spanish for gold.

Again Pedro tried to sit up and this time, with Flash's assistance, managed it.

The vulture in the sky floated just overhead, waiting.

A trout leaped clear of the creek and, sides flashing in the sunlight, fell back with a splash and plop.

Pedro pointed with a shaking arm at the trail while his bulging eyes were wild with fear. "Horsemen ride thees way, señor, Czar Lumley and Squeaky and the sheriff."

The sheepherder tried to scramble to unsteady feet. But he fell back, fists clenching and unclenching.

CHAPTER VI

A Little Fancy Shooting

LED by Sheriff Biggs, the posse rode straight to the two men under the cottonwoods. Of course they sought Pedro who had tried to kill Woolly Peters. He'd be arrested and brought to trial for the attempt upon the sheepman's life. He should be punished for his lawless act. Thinking thus, Flash marveled that he should concern himself with a matter that did not affect him one way or the other. Yet Helen somehow stood in the foreground of the picture.

Amos rode up, drew rein. His gun was in his hand. "Stick 'em up, Durkin," he ordered.

Flash had an impulse to go for his gun. However, there was no need to shoot his way out of this predicament. There was some mistake. A few words of explanation and the matter would be smoothed out; apparently the sheriff thought he had tried to kill Peters. The mistake was laughable. Pedro puts lead into Peters and the blundering sheriff accuses Flash of the crime. From his experience this was about as straight as a sheriff got things, Flash considered. The old six-gun was the best means of dispensing justice. This new-fangled law thing made ridiculous mistakes.

"Reckon yo're grabbin' the wrong feller," Flash said.

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"Do your protestin' to the jedge, Flash. We got you dead to rights."

The thoroughly frightened Pedro stood up now at cost of much pain and huddled close to Flash as if for protection.

Czar stepped off his horse and walking to Flash, collected his gun.

Flash asked, "What yuh want me for, Sheriff?"

"You know damned well what I want you for. No need of that innocence gag. You cracked down on Woolly Peters."

"How is he?"

"Seems like he's goin' to live. Doc Blaine from Sagebrush is attendin' him."

"Plumb glad to hear Woolly ain't beefed," Flash said.

"You ought to be," the sheriff said sourly. "It'll make your term less."

At the sheriff's confident words Flash lost his temper. "What makes yuh think I drilled Peters, and how come yuh get on the trail so pronto?"

"Don't know that it's any of your business, but just to relieve your curiosity, I'll tell you. First off you had a run-in with Peters. Threatened to kill him. Next thing — bang, he's potted. All right, I get a phone call—"

"Reckon Czar Lumley tipped you quick."

"That don't make no never mind at all. Fact is, he did. He wants to stop these killings on the mesa. We come high-tailing to the sheep camp. At Peters' shack we see your hoss' hoof marks and we picks up three cartridges from your forty-five gun in the yard. They's yours."

"Yeah, I ejected the shells in the yard all right and reloaded. But I shot at the would-be murderer, not at Peters."

"Maybe so, but you wouldn't expect me to believe it," Amos snapped.

"What happened, Pedro?" Czar asked. "Did you try to put your rope on him and he charged you?"

"But no, señor. *Mi caballo* fall down and I am hurt. Thees so good Flash come to my aid. He bring me back to life when I am die. Tell me, the sheriff take him to the *carcel?*"

"We're puttin' him where he won't have no chance to mess around Piñon Mesa again."

"But, señor, he ees innocent. He have the heart of *oro.*"

"And a damned wicked shootin' eye," Squeaky said, unconsciously feeling of his bandaged wrist.

At this precise moment a lone rider spurred up to the group. His horse was sweat-lathered. The man—he was scarcely that—dropped with fatigue. His eyes were bloodshot from gazing long hours against the sun's glare and his lips were cracked by alkali dust.

Paul tumbled off his horse and ran to Flash.

"You never wait for me where there's any excitement. You act as if we weren't pards—" He broke off, and looked at Flash's empty holster. "Why, where's your gun?" he asked in surprise.

"They took it away from me," Flash said and smiled good-naturedly. "Sheriff claims I shot Woolly Peters."

Paul whispered, "I've got a gun. You make a break and I'm with you, shooting all the way."

Pedro reeled as he realized that Flash was being arrested for the attempt upon the sheepman's life. The Mexican, battered by life, kicked and cuffed, mistreated, held by the Piñon Mesa dwellers to be less than a dog, suddenly felt a glow of gratitude for the Lazy J foreman.

When Pedro lay injured Flash had picked him up and had ministered to him with tenderness; he had spoken the first kind words the Mexican had heard in long years.

A new man was born in Pedro Gonzales.

"The so good Flash, he ees a little innocent. I am plug Peters," the Mexican confessed. "Eet ees this way. I meet Czar and he say do I want to make five hundred *duros* and I say of

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a surety. And he say, eet ees so easy, all I have do ees keel the señor of the sheep. I have fight with thees man Peters. He, what you call, discharge me and he not pay me all that I have earn. I am *muy bravo* towards him. Thees Czar he gave me the American *aguardiente* to drink and I am fit to keel even my amigo. But Pedro ees not *tonto,* so I say, but if I keel heem, the sheriff bag me, no? Then how am I enjoy thees money? Czar say, 'The crime we put on Flash. For long time I want heem out of way. Now you do thees thing and it'll look—' "

"A dirty lie," growled Czar and his hand streaked for his gun. It came up, pointed at the Mexican. His finger nursed the trigger.

Quicker than the eye could follow Flash's hand swept down to Pedro's holster and came up with a blazing six-gun. He shot with both eyes open. The weapon in Czar's hand went spinning through the air, knocked out of his grip. Blood trickled down the cowman's fingers.

At the same moment, it seemed, Flash turned the gun on Squeaky who had his weapon half out of the holster. "Put her back, Squeaky," Flash suggested. "Yore wrist must be plumb sore as it is."

Squeaky drew his hand gingerly away from his six-shooter.

Flash turned to the sheriff. "Biggs, yuh've listened to the confession of the Mex. He's just a poor misguided kid. Shore, he cracked down on Peters. But the real murderer is Czar Lumley. He's loosed murder and cow stealin' and other crimes on the mesa and it's time he was took into custody."

"It's a frame-up. The Mex is lyin'," Czar growled in his bass rumble.

"Why would he lie to put himself into a mess?" Flash asked. "I can verify most of the kid's story. I was waitin' round, figurin' there'd be some hell loosed."

"By cracky, that's right, too," the sheriff conceded. "Likely the Mex is tellin' the straight of it."

A deputy clapped steel bracelets on Czar, then helped him into his saddle and thereafter tied his feet together under the stirrups.

Pedro, too, was boosted up behind Flash. "Think yuh can stick on all right?" Flash asked.

"Of a surety. I ride to clear *amigo mio,* the one hombre who have treated Pedro as if he have the soul."

The sheriff handed back the Lazy J foreman's gun.

Paul's freckled face was wreathed in a wide grin. "We're all set again, pard," he told Flash.

The little cavalcade got under way, spiraling up the mountain range that lay between it and home country.

CHAPTER VII

Flash Takes a Detour

AFTERNOON sun beat upon the high country. Jamboree Creek fretted madly at the boulders in its rapid course.

A deputy sheriff led the way, followed by Czar and Squeaky, Biggs, Flash, Paul and the others.

"This case stands cleared up," the sheriff mused aloud. "Wish I could get a line on Miller's killin' and the shootin' up of Old Man Freeland."

"Czar's arrest may clear up them mysteries," Flash said.

"When I get him in I'll give him the third degree. Maybe he'll know somethin'." They rode in silence for a space. A little cool breeze, pine-scented, blew down the valley, tempering the heat of the rocky expanse.

"You don't think Pedro had a hand in those other cases?" the sheriff asked Flash.

"Nope, he didn't have a thing to do with 'em. Pedro ain't a killer," Flash replied. "He was used by Czar this one time."

"Who you figure pulled those other jobs?"

"Can't rightly say. Feller was seen near the Lazy J bunkhouse awhile afore the killin' of Miller, feller who

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hadn't no business round there. Name of Squeaky Phipps."

Squeaky's hand poised over his gun butt, but he did not draw. Covering him was a steady-held six-gun in Flash's hand.

"I wouldn't get plumb nervous thataway," Flash told the gunman.

"Yo're tryin' to ride me," Squeaky snarled.

"Aim to do just that, 'til I put yuh where yuh belong."

"Meanin'?"

"The pen, of course."

Their glances met and fenced.

Czar rumbled, "I've busted sheriffs afore and it's your turn now. You can't hogtie me and my waddies."

Amos tugged at his mustache. "You're goin' where the only bustin' you'll do is bustin' big rocks into little ones."

A magpie called tauntingly.

The sheriff rode up to Squeaky Phipps and flipped the six-shooter from the gunman's right hip. "Just a little precaution," he said. "I'm arrestin' you as a material witness in this Peters case. When Czar gets through talkin', likely I'll put another charge ag'in you."

In that instant the strength seemed to ebb out of the Turkeytrack Z gun wizard.

The horses slowed their gait, heads drooping wearily. Human bodies ached dully from long hours in the saddle. The party came to the forks in the trail beside a tumbling river. One branch led to Sagebrush, the other to the Lazy J Ranch and the sheep camp of Woolly Peters.

Flash said to Paul, "Sonny, yuh can ride on with the posse. I'm detourin' a little, want to find out how Peters is."

Paul grinned knowingly. He asked, "You'll catch us later?"

"Maybe so," Flash said. He clattered away, a dust cloud swirling around him.

The sheriff shifted the holster at his belt and announced to the party in general and to Paul in particular, "Flash is a plumb fool."

Paul blazed. His idol was being attacked when he wasn't on hand to defend himself. The boy's freckled face was stern, his little chin outjutted belligerently. Excitement accentuated his cow country vernacular.

"Flash ain't no fool. Those that figure him one are the fools. I suppose you believe he's foolish 'cause he's ridin' to Helen. I tell you, she is—you know, a glorious girl. She's plumb nuts about Flash and—"

To further taunt the lad Amos said, "She's sheep folks, ain't she?"

"Sheep folks or not, she's a lot finer'n any gal on the mesa. I'm backin' Flash's play. What you say against him is said against me, too. Savvy?" He swept the riders with hot eyes, spoiling for battle.

The sheriff chuckled. He hastened to explain; "I wasn't castin' no aspersions at Flash. Gosh no. And this matter of love-makin' is plumb personal. What I was a-gettin' at was the plumb foolish way he rides into danger with that gun of his. Others got the drop on him and he pulls his six-shooter and fights it out. Rides lone-handed into a bunch of rustlers. Goes high-tailin' it along a trail he knows is watched by a man on the cliff above."

"Huh," snorted Paul, "that ain't foolishness. Listen, Sheriff, he ain't foolish a-tall, bumpin' into danger thataway. Ever notice how he shoots?"

"Nope, can't follow his draw."

"Well, I'll tell you. He don't have to close his eye to sight when he shoots. Keeps his eyes wide open. Got the advantage of the feller who takes time to squint. So—so that makes him gosh-awful fast—makes him just three points faster'n lightnin'."

As Flash clattered into the yard of the Peters' sheep camp Helen rocketed out of the door and ran pell-mell at the fast-traveling horse. Flash jumped to the ground, and then man and girl seemed to melt suddenly into each other's arms.

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Some Fellow Members

The names of these members appear on page **567.**

Join Trail's End.

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# of Trail's End

The names of these members appear on page 567.

See page 524.

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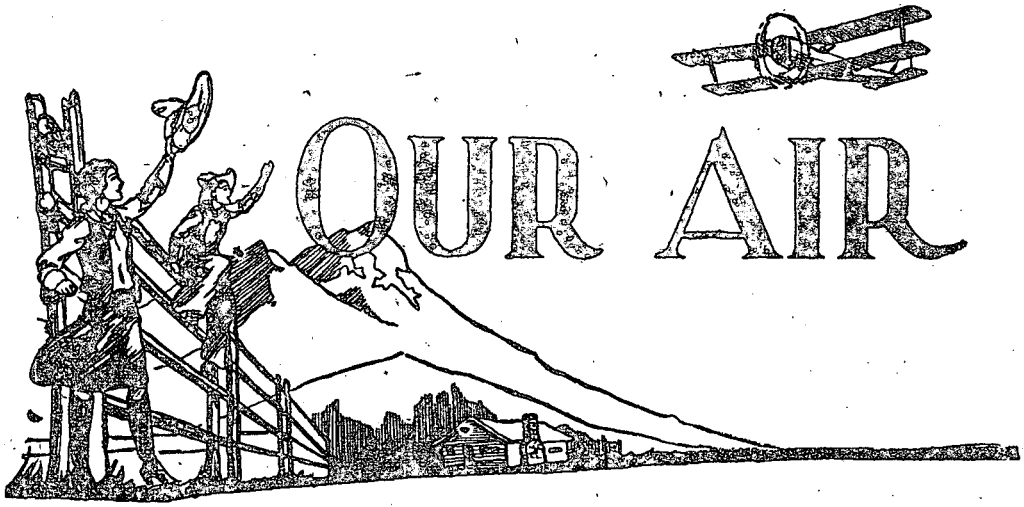

OUR AIR MAIL is running daily between the editorial office of RANCH ROMANCES and its readers throughout the world. The Editor wishes to establish a definite understanding with every reader and be in a position to know what you want and why. RANCH ROMANCES is not published for anyone but the reader, and we want you to look upon this magazine as something distinctly your own. Take a personal interest in its future. Write and tell us exactly the kind of story that you think ought to go into it. And we want to help make friends for our readers. We want to help you to know friends who are thousands of miles away or within a stone's throw of your own town. OUR AIR MAIL will be glad to forward and exchange letters. The Editor reserves the right to read and turn over to the Postal Authorities, if necessary, anything that is not in keeping with the clean, outdoor spirit of RANCH ROMANCES. Be sure to enclose postage for letters sent by OUR AIR MAIL.

"BLONDY" WANTS LETTERS

Dear Editor:

I have just been reading Ranch Romances for a month and like them first-rate. It is the best mag going, I think. The only matter is, we only get it twice a month and I'd like it every week. Here is my description, I am 15 years old, blond hair, hazel eyes, and love all clean outdoor sports, also dancing.

I would like to hear from everybody that would care to write to a lonesome city girl. Remember, sailors, soldiers, cowboys, cowgirls and anyone.

I remain,

An R. R. Reader,

"BLONDY."

Miss Irene Sordet,
64 Pine St., Torrington, Conn.

A TEXAS COWBOY

Dear Editor:

I am a regular reader of R. R. and am hungry for pen pals, I tell you, and I want 'em bad, especially pretty girls! I promise to answer every letter and will exchange snapshots.

I am 17 years of age, have black hair, brown eyes. I work on the Circle X Ranch about two miles from Hext, Texas.

Now all of you pretty girls don't be bashful, just pick up your pens and write.

Wishing the R. R. good luck,

Yours truly,

MENDAL KEITH.

Hext, Texas.

WHAT ABOUT IT, AMIGOS?

Dear Editor:

Here are the three coupons and the ten cents necessary for the pin. Know what? I've been a reader of Ranch Romances for about four years and right now am wondering why I didn't become a Trail Ender sooner. But here I am and have at last made up my mind that of all the magazines that I have read, Double R is voted into the "Hall of Fame."

Felt so good after reading the latest R. R. that I made up a little song called "A Trail Ender" which you sing to the tune of that cowboy ballad, "Bad Companions." (Whoa! there's no connection whatever between the titles.)

Wait a minute! I'm not through. You guessed it. I want pen pals galore! Can do, Double R cowpokes? Great, the pleasure is all mine.

Now all of you cowgirls, city girls, cowboys, Uncle Sam's boys, and others who like the real outdoors and hope some day to live out in a little home tucked in God's own valley, where the leaves and wind say, "Good-night"; and the birds and stream say, "Good-morning"—write.

Here's a description: Am 18½ years, have dark brown hair (that won't behave), blue eyes (that dream), and have just graduated from a Commercial High School. I love to hike, also to drive in the country, like to sketch a bit, to embroider a little, to collect poems of friendship and inspiration, and love to read Western, air, and other adventure stories. My favorite instrument is a guitar, though I can play none.

The case rests with you and plaintiff pleads guilty of a longing—what's the verdict?

A Trail Ender

Oh, I am a Trail Ender,
One of that great outlay,
Where riders of the Double R
Find rest and joy alway.

I'd roamed from mag to mag,
The best of all to find,
Until my weary eye-nag
Was almost left stone blind.

At last I found the only,
That took away the blues,
Took me on a cow-pony
Out where the trail is through.

There to a Trail's End outfit,
Of people near and far,
Who love the true-blue spirit
That rules in Double R.

Adios and Luck,

"GYPSY HEART."

Helen Jouget,
1258 E. 14 St., Cleveland, Ohio.

P. S.—Please, Editor, shut your eyes and miss the waste-basket. O-o-o-o-h, thank you.

A LONELY SAILOR BOY

Dear Editor:

I have been reading your wonderful mag ever since I joined the Navy three years ago. Wherever I go, whether in a foreign country or in the good old U. S. A., I have always been able to get the Double R mag. And I think that that alone is a pretty high recommendation for your magazine.

I surely do hope this letter brings me just "gobs and gobs" of pen pals as I sure do find lots of time on my hands down here in Cuba and I promise to

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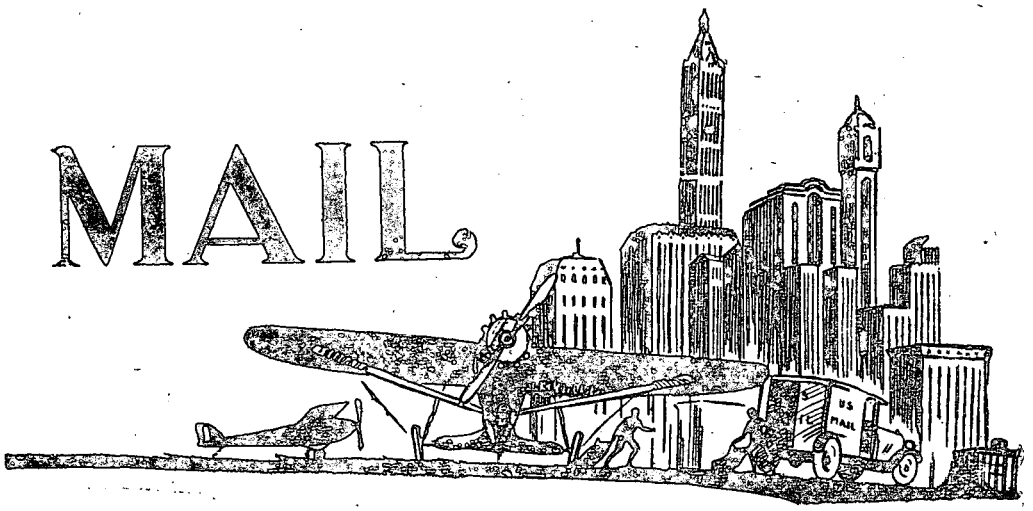

answer each and every letter that I receive. I will be more than glad to exchange snapshots with anyone who cares to.

Come on all you readers of the good old Double R and write to a lonely gob who is just twenty years of age. I can write lots of interesting letters as I have traveled a good deal since I have been in the Navy.

I believe that I can safely say that half the Navy reads Ranch Romances, so why not give a lonely boy a chance to give his pen some exercise.

Wishing Ranch Romances the best of success in the future, I remain,

Yours truly,
RUSSELL TRUMP.

U. S. S. Montcalm,
Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

HAS LOTS TO TELL

Dear Editor:

I just finished reading "The Lure of the West" by Dorrance and I enjoyed it immensely, in fact few stories have entertained me and impressed me as that one did. Although I thought the part about the educated Indian reverting back to the primitive was just a little bit exaggerated. However, the story kept me guessing clear to the very end and it was brimful of suspense and excitement. It was typical of the vivid clean outdoor Ranch Romances stories. I always enjoy reading the Ranch Romances, and may it live forever.

I like your idea of making friends between your readers and may I too be one of the fortunate ones to appear in "Our Air Mail"? I am 28 and a native of California. I have been in the theatrical business some and in one or two movies and I have promoted a number of amateur dramatic clubs; also, I have travelled over the West a great deal and I shall be very happy to tell anyone who cares to write, about California. I guarantee to answer all letters. And if there is anyone who is thinking about coming to California to break in the movies, believe me I can give them some good straight-from-the-shoulder advice.

With best wishes to the R. R. I will close.

Sincerely,
WILLIS SLATER.

c/o Calif. Highway Comm.
Camp 14, Paynes Creek, Calif.

COME ON, YOU ARTISTS

Dear Editor:

I have a hunch that this is my lucky day. I hope it is, maybe you will print this, my third plea for pen pals.

In the last two years I havn't missed a copy of Ranch Romances. I think it is a wonderful magazine and enjoy all of the stories but I always turn first to Our Air Mail.

I'm going to describe myself first and then I'm going to ask all of you to write to me and I'll promise to answer every one who writes me a line. I am twenty years of age, have brown hair, blue eyes and a fair complexion. My hobbies are painting, reading and receiving letters.

If I should be lucky enough to have this printed, please don't any of you fail to write me. Letters from artists will be especially appreciated.

Hopefully yours,
BLANCHE BESTE.

Box 643, Beeville, Texas.

REAL WESTERN FOLK, HERE

Dear Editor:

You published my letter in the second edition of the February Ranch Romances. I want to thank all who wrote—four hundred and fifty of them—not only for writing me but for the interest they showed in this part of the country where the West is not dead by any means. I've answered as many letters as time permitted, and will endeavor to send to each one just a line of acknowledgment. And I want to say for your Air Mail gang that they're mighty fine folks, and I'll be glad to hear from them again.

We are very happy in our mountain home, hubby and I. I lived in the city all my life, been accustomed to society and the pleasures that the city offers. I never dreamed I could be satisfied so far away from Broadway. But I am. We are very busy folks during the day, but when night comes we surely enjoy the peace and quiet, the low murmuring of the pines, the plaintive coo of the mourning dove, the call of the owl in the top of the old lone pine beside the house, the song of birds; all help us to forget the cares of the day.

Right now we're interested in baby chicks and turkeys. They surely are cute little fellows. And soon we'll have some wild mallard ducklings. We set the eggs under a big Plymouth Rock hen, and when those ducklings make their appearance she'll be one surprised hen. She'll sure think we put something over on her.

Writers of Western fiction can find plenty of material here. If any of them are interested and will write us we will be glad to give them the details and, if they come, introduce them to some of the old-timers who can relate thrilling tales of the early days when bad, bold bandits roamed through here.

Again thanking your readers for their interesting messages, I am,

Sincerely yours,
FLORENCE A. BRUNKE.

Lone Pine Ranch,
Star Route,
Coalinga, Calif.

BLUE-EYES FEELS LIKE WRITING

Dear Editor:

Looks like I'm the only one who has ever dared to write from the Jayhawk State, so I hope my letter will be published.

Ye story writers! Let's have some more stories like "Tiger Tim" and the "Man of Saddlehorn."

Like Katchy Kate, I too am just achin' to write to some of your readers, especially cowboys and people who live out where the West begins, so come on and write me a few lines while you are resting in the bunkhouse. Oh, I've seen some cowboys but never have written to one.

Guess I'd better read my pedigree so, hear ye, one and all, I am eighteen years young, and have blue eyes, brown bobbed hair. I am good-natured and love all out-of-door sports plus town life, as my real home is in town. At the present time I'm visiting on a 160 acre farm.

Well, here's to Double R's success. Muchas gracias for all favors in advance.

Adios Amigo,
RUTH LAWSON.

Box 35, R. R. No. 4
McCune, Kansas.

R. R. 2

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THIS GAL LOVES HORSES

Dear Editor:

I am feeling pretty good this evening, and having lots of time, I thought I would write to you.

The R. R. pins sure are great. All the girls at school asked me where I got it. Of course I told them, so you had better get a lot more of the R. R. pins on hand.

I have read every magazine on the market and Ranch Romances is the best. My one and only hobby is horses.

Now when a person writes a letter to some of the readers, who wants pen pals, why doesn't he or she answer?

I am not lonesome or lacking in friends. I want pen pals and lots of them. Every letter will be answered.

I don't care where or who they come from, I just want pen pals.

Cordially yours,
ANN CLARKE.

433 Milton Ave., Janesville, Wis.

EASY TO LOOK AT

Dear Editor:

Come on R. R. readers and lets make lots of whoopee. I have recently become an ardent lover of Ranch Romances, and they sure are the best of all Western romances.

And say, dear Editor, here is a tip to the boys and girls, especially the girls, who want to hear from the West. I come from the far, far West where ranches are ranches and its romances are real. And say, I was terribly disappointed not to find my state represented by letters in our last Air Mail.

Now, friends and future letter pals, I am from Idaho, and can tell and relate to you many of the true romances of the good old Western days. Let's have lots of letters, dear pals.

As for myself, I am nearing twenty-one years of age, have raven black hair, and dark brown eyes. My college pals kid me about being the best looking man on the campus, but I can't always believe them. Now as I finish I surely hope that all Our Air Mail boys, and especially the girls, will write and be willing to exchange snapshots with me.

Yours always,
"POWDER PUFF."

Carl Leonard,
Ridenbaugh Hall,
Moscow, Idaho.

P. S.—Please, dear Editor, print this letter so that my state will be represented in Our Air Mail.

SNOWED UNDER

Dear Editor:

I hope you'll print this letter in Our Air Mail as I want to thank all those who wrote to me but I've received so many letters I find it absolutely impossible to reply to all and the fact that I'm working long hours don't help matters any.

I received a regular shower of letters and heartily wish to thank Our Air Mail Editor and all those who even considered writing to me, and I'm sorry I've got to disappoint so many, but such is life, eh?

Please print this so those who don't receive an answer will understand the reason.

More success to everyone and Double R.,
BILL SHILLHORN.

Atwood, Ontario, Canada.

SHE'S IN EARNEST

Dear Editor:

Your magazine is a "wow"! More power to Ranch Romances! And may we have more stories of Johnston McCulley's like the "Love of Señor Cowpoke." It takes a good magazine to make me write a letter like this, but you've got "it"!

I hope to see this in print real soon and I also wann'a round up a few pen pals. Anyone want to swap letters and pictures with a little Spaniard? Either sex. If so, write soon. I am tall, slender, have black eyes and hair and love all sports, art, music and well—write and find out what I like!

Wishing the Clayton Magazines the best of success, I remain,

Truly yours,
(MISS) RITA VASQUEZ.

General Delivery,
Saint Louis, Mo.

WRITE TO VIOLET

Dear Editor:

Here's just another girl who is a constant reader of the Double R and who gets a great kick out of it.

I love treasure hunts and at the time being I am looking for loads of pen pals. Are you going to help me out? Thanks a lot! I won't be satisfied until I find them. I can play a banjo, dance anything from the Tango to Collegiate and like all sports. I am a steno. and will be nineteen years old soon. I'll answer all letters, so come on you lonesome boys and girls and fill my mail box.

Cheerio!
VIOLET.

Violet Larsen,
3615 W. North Ave.,
Chicago, Ill.

LOOKING FOR A PARDNER

Dear Editor:

I have been reading your splendid Ranch Romances for over a year and have never found anything better. Am planning a motor camping trip to Washington, down the coast, through the Southern states and up the Atlantic Coast to Mass., then home by way of Niagara Falls. Would like to hear from people who are interested in camping, and in return will tell them of my two winters in Texas and one in Florida. Also 23 other states. So far my travels have been somewhat lonely as I have never taken a pardner but if I can find the right party who wants to take a trip with me, am willing to have a pardner. Am especially interested in hearing from people in the states this trip will take me through and will answer all interesting letters and perhaps pay you a call while on my trip.

BILL SHILLHORN.

c/o Our Air Mail.

PAGING LONELY YOUNG MEN

Dear Editor:

By chance I came across an August edition of your wonderful magazine, Ranch Romances, and I was very interested indeed, and wondered if you would give an English girl a chance in your Air Mail. Would any of your lonely young men care to become a pen pal to me? It seems terrible to me, whose life is one round of pleasure, that anyone should be lonely. I should thoroughly enjoy writing to all the lonely young men who care to write to me, and promise to make my letters as interesting and enjoyable as possible. I should love to hear the personal romances of those who live in the Wild West. Male sex is preferred, but I should have the greatest pleasure in writing to any lonely girls. I am willing to exchange photos, as I like to write to people whom I know. I had thought of answering one of the letters in the Air Mail, but thought if I did it this way I would get a chance to write more. Won't somebody be a brick, and write?

Now for a description of myself. I am sweet seventeen, have dark brown, wavy hair, hazel eyes, rather round face, and a fairly plump figure, in fact, am an all-round, fifty-fifty English girl, proud of my little Mother-country. Will this do?

Please, Editor, make them write quickly, as I'm dying to answer their letters.

Thanking you in anticipation,
Yours sincerely,
ELSIE.

P. S.—I have passed on, as one passes on all good things, your magazine, Ranch Romances, to my best chum, who is also writing to you, hoping you will give us a chance, and favor us with a place in your Air Mail.

Miss E. Sorrell,
41, Fulham Park Gdns.,
Fulham, London, S. W. 6

STAND BY FOR ENGLAND

Dear Editor:

This is Derby, England, calling. I am real wild about R. R. I just can't wait for it coming out; it's the best West mag. I've read, and I've read a good many.

Now I want some pen pals. I am nineteen, fond of sports, dancing and outdoors and camping, so don't disappoint me. I expect piles of letters. I will promise to answer all.

Letters from all parts of U. S. A. welcomed, boys or girls. So here's to the best mag., the Ranch Romances.
JOHN-O-ENGLAND.

J. G. Allsop,
39 Westbury Street,
Derby,
Derbyshire,
England.

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HURRAH FOR RANCH!

Dear Editor:

Please try and find space in the Air Mail of your wonderful magazine, R. R., for a Scotch Canadian who would like to correspond with boys and girls who have a longing for the days to come when they can strap on their pack and look for new trails to conquer.

I am planning a trip to the province of New Brunswick where I first came across the R. R. magazine in an old deserted lumber camp while on a hunting trip for big game. I didn't do much hunting next day as I read the mag through that night, and who will blame a chap for that?

I have not missed but three or four copies since then, you can bet.

Well, here's hoping for continued success for your excellent mag, R. R.

Yours sincerely,

RAY BROWN.

1717-12 St.,
Detroit, Mich.

SHE HAS A LARGE MAIL BOX

Dear Editor:

I just flew over your air mail and thought I would drop a letter for the first time. I do hope I get many letters. I sure boost your magazine enough. I have been reading it ever since I can remember. Please have some more stories like, "Pals of Pleasant Valley."

I sure would enjoy hearing from some sailors, marines, of U. S., from Hawaii and all foreign countries, cowboys (not drug store cowboys—real he-men), and college boys. That ought to include all.

I can play the violin and piano. Oh, yes, I forgot I can play the phonograph. I love dancing, and all winter and summer sports. I can write shorthand and type.

I have a large mail box, so don't be afraid of overfilling it. Will answer all letters. Also exchange snapshots.

Everyone write,

BETTY LOU.

c/o Our Air Mail.

GIVE HIM A SQUARE DEAL

Dear Editor:

Would you please favor a lonesome Texas boy who would like very much to have some real interesting pen pals, by inserting this letter in your truly wonderful Air Mail Dep't? And that's not servile flattery in the least. Do you know that part of R. R.'s tremendous "sales appeal" is the Air Mail Dep't? I have taken this from several readers' attitudes? So keep on printing the friendly, interesting letters.

I would like to have some boys and girls write to me. I have answered about twenty letters that appeared in the A. M. Dep't. and I have received only one reply to date. Are they giving us a square deal? I am 19 years old, have dark hair, dark-complexioned, light brown eyes. If you want to know anything else you will have to write to me. I will exchange photos with any who so desire. I sincerely promise to answer each and every letter received.

So come on everybody and write and then wait for a sure answer.

Waiting for the day when R. R.'s a weekly instead of a semi-monthly,

Sincerely yours,

RAY C. TUTTLE.

Humble,
Texas.

FROM A FOREST RANGER

Dear Editor:

I have read Ranch Romances for a long time and like it very much. I have made regular readers of many of my friends, just by giving them a copy that I had read. In my opinion it would be wise if all friends of Ranch Romances would do the same. It would acquaint other folks with a good clean magazine.

I would like very, very much to have some pen pals. I am a forest ranger, living in the heart of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Am fond of fishing, hunting and hiking. In fact, I love, "My Blue Ridge Mountain Home," and everything about it. but I get lonesome sometimes. Won't some of you girls write to me and send snapshots? It certainly would make the skies bluer and the sunshine brighter. I promise to answer all letters and send snapshots, if you wish me to do so.

Respectfully,

BUCK.

c/o Our Air Mail.

MORE PRAISE FOR R. R.

Dear Editor:

I am one of your faithful readers—away over here in England. This will show you how your grand little mag. circulates. I enjoy the stories in it immensely, they are so different from our English ones. Well, I reckon you know what I'm after, I want to ask you if you'll please introduce me into the Our Air Mail page. I would just like to make friends with some other R. R. readers over in your country or Canada.

I'll be a real pen pal to whoever likes to write—boys or girls over 21. I'll just tell them what I'm like. I have brown hair and darker eyes, fresh complexion and rather slim, have a bright outlook on life, so bright letters promised to whoever wants cheering up. Well, Editor, here's my best respects to you, and I shall be more than grateful if you'll squeeze this in the Our Air Mail page at your leisure. I'm patient enough to wait in the line. No need to wish the R. R. success—it already has it, but if it wants any more praise—everybody give it one big "Hurrah!"

So kindest regards,

From a faithful reader,

ROSITA ALLICE.

Apthorpe.
Weston Rd.,
Bath,
Somerset, England.

SHE'S RARIN' TO WRITE

Dear Editor:

Looking through Our Air Mail in the first April Number, I find there isn't any mail from Colorado, so I have decided to try my luck.

Your magazine is wonderful! There isn't another to come up to its standards, and I'm sure everyone enjoys reading it as much as I do.

But I'm very lonely, and want some pen pals. Do you think you can help me? I'm a girl, but I hope it won't stop any boy from writing also. I like to dance and do everything that is a lot of fun. I'm a brunette.

Here's hoping you will print my letter, and find me some pen pals.

Boosting for R. R.

VILMA RAY.

Aguilar,
Colorado.

P. S.—Won't Henry Faucett, Juliette Charbonneau, and Forget-me-not please write to me?

SHE'S RAVIN' TO WRITE

Dear Editor:

This is about my fourth or fifth letter to Our Air Mail department, and every time I've written, I have not had the pleasure of seeing my letter in print, so please don't disappoint me this time if you can help it.

I am a girl and although I am not twenty-one, I am free and white and eighteen and just rarin' to go, so everybody please write to me and I'll promise to answer all letters and also answer any questions that you care to ask, so get busy everyone.

I am making a collection of cowboy songs and poems so if anyone will kindly send me some, I'll be very grateful.

And before I close I'll give my description.

I am 18 years old, black hair, brown eyes, and fair complexion.

And again before I close, let's all get together and give three rousing cheers for the best little mag. on the market, Ranch Romances.

Adios, Hasta Luego,

BABE.

Miss Estelle H. De La Torre,
427 Quarantinia St.,
Santa Barbara,
Calif.

TWO FARMERETTE SISTERS

Dear Editor:

We have been reading your wonderful Ranch Romances for some time and hope to read it for some time to come.

We are two farmerette sisters who like to hear from people in all parts of the world, especially airmen and cowboys, about our age. We are 21 and 17 years old respectively and have brown hair and eyes.

Here's hoping that Ranch Romances will be printed forever and that we will receive bushels of letters. We promise to answer each one.

We will always remain,

"PEPPY" and "SNAPPY."

Irma and Betty Strey,
R. R. No. 1, Neenah, Wisconsin.

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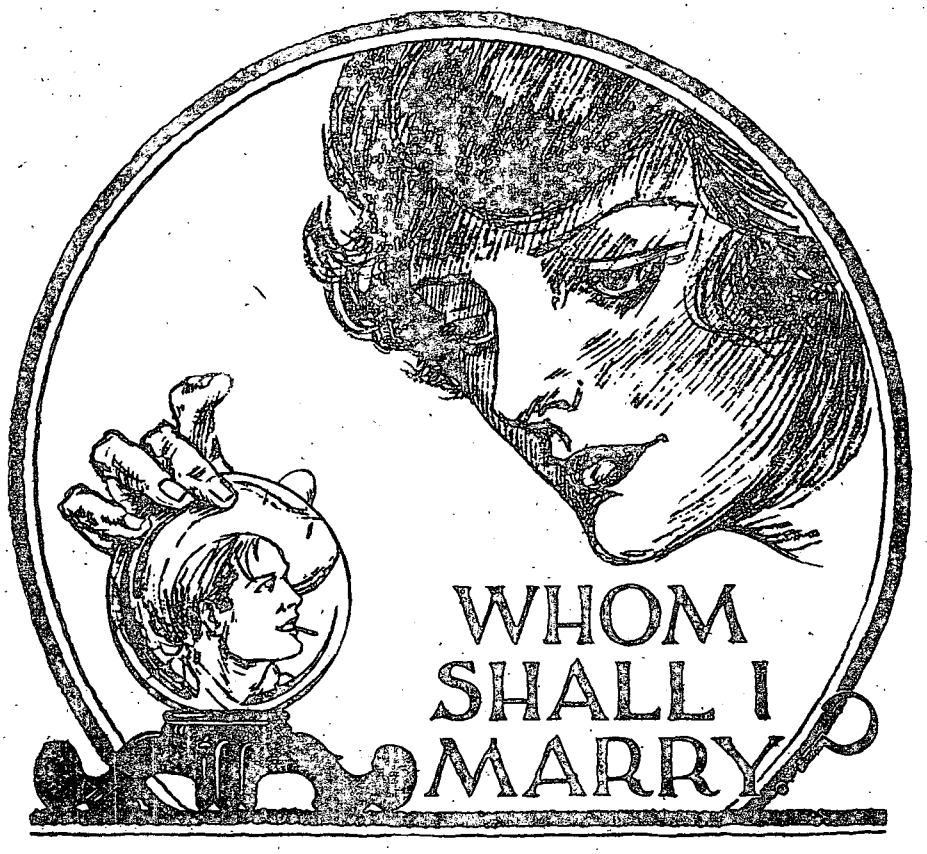

By PROFESSOR MARCUS MARI

SEPTEMBER

LIBRA

LIBRA governs after September twenty-second. The people of this sign are gifted with great foresight and intuition. They are very susceptible to the influence of others, and act like those by whom they are strongly impressed. They have a fine aptitude for mimicry, and as actors or actresses they show remarkable talent and seem to live the parts they portray.

Their first impressions are usually correct, and they should guard against yielding to the opinions and decisions of others.

In matters of friendship they disregard social position and money, only the personal qualities of mind and temperament of others are of importance to them. They are so devoted to friends that a disparaging comment or an indignity offered one they love is regarded almost as a personal insult.

Libra people love excitement and they are apt to act on the spur of the moment. They always find it difficult and disagreeable to give reasons for what they do and say, and when they are associated with people who demand reasons and explanations for everything, the resulting discord makes them angry and unhappy. They are quick-tempered, and, when angry, their remarks are cutting and right to the point, leaving little doubt as to the real state of their feelings.

The sense of personal freedom is so strong in Libra people that they should not marry unless they are willing to give as well as take. Libra and Virgo people, if they practice forebearance and respect the rights and individuality of each other, often make a happy marriage.

Professor Mari will give a personal reading to any reader who wishes to fill out the coupon.

Name ..... Sex .....

Address .....

Exact date of birth: Year ..... Month ..... Date .....

Always use this coupon and enclose stamped envelope. 9-27-29

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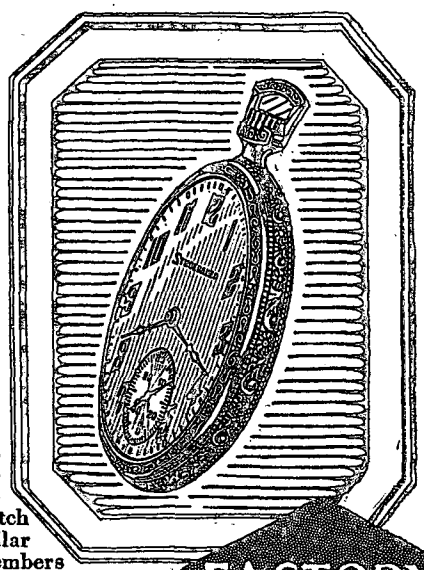
Why Did This Watch Man Buy a 21-Jewel STUDEBAKER?

The 8-Adjustment Insured Watch

READ THIS:

A. E. L., an Oregon jeweler and watchmaker, is one of many jewelers who answered these ads and purchased a 21-Jewel Studebaker Watch for their personal use at our regular catalog prices. He wrote us recently: "The Studebaker Watch I received from you some time ago is far more than I expected for the money and as a timekeeper it is the official. The foreman of a large factory here gets his time from my Studebaker, even though he has a watch that cost him TWICE *the price at which you sell the Studebaker. Words cannot express my appreciation of this fine watch."*



THIS new method of selling watches at factory prices direct-to-the-customer has merited remarkable popularity everywhere. Imagine being able to purchase the magnificent 21-Jewel, 8-Adjustment, thin-model Studebaker Watch *at factory prices*—the lowest prices ever named for similar quality! The Studebaker Watch Company, directed by members of the Studebaker family, whose name has meant square dealing for three-quarters of a century, manufactures and sells DIRECT to the customer. You can buy on very liberal credit terms or for cash. You can actually own a Studebaker watch out of your present income. *The Studebaker Watch is insured for the lifetime of the purchaser.* 100 exquisite styles in Pocket Watches, Strap Watches and Bracelet Watches. A beautiful 6-color catalog giving particulars of this unusual watch-buying opportunity will be sent FREE and *without obligation*. Simply mail the coupon to us TODAY!

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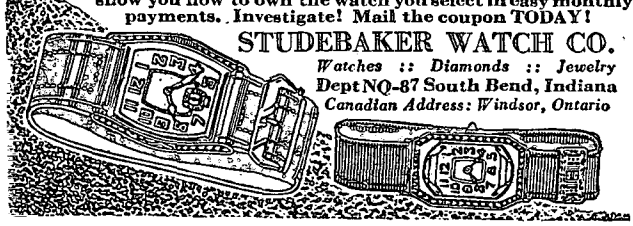

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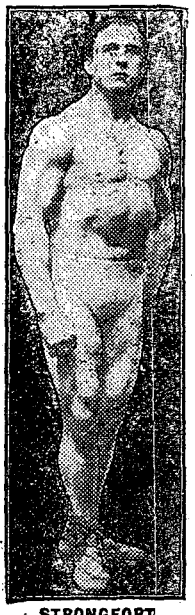
At the Dances
—Are You a Wall Flower?



Are you a poor, spineless wretch, dreading to ask a girl to dance with you? Are you afraid to talk to her? Do you stand by, watching the other fellows dancing and laughing and making a big hit? You lack nerve. You lack manly courage. **Men laugh at your weakness. Women sneer at you!** Your company isn't wanted. Your timidity bars you from social enjoyment and even makes you unfit for marriage.

Take Heart, Young Man

STRONGFORTISM will give you manly strength. Strongfortism will build up that body of yours in such a way as to make a brand new fellow out of you. At the dances and parties you'll be a most popular chap—one sought after and admired by women, and played up to by men. In business you'll command success.

STRONGFORTISM

will show you how to develop all your muscles and bring your body to its highest efficiency. A new day dawns for you when you take up STRONGFORTISM. Let me tell you about it. You can't afford to be without this knowledge if you have wasted your vitality in any way and lost your energy and strength.

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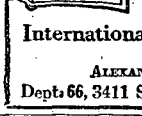

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For halitosis is a definite daily threat to all. And for very obvious reasons, physicians explain. So slight a matter as a decaying tooth may cause it. Or an abnormal condition of the gums. Or fermenting food particles skipped by the tooth brush. Or minor nose and throat infection. Or excesses of eating, drinking and smoking.

Intelligent people recognize the risk and minimize it by the regular use of full strength Listerine as a mouth wash and gargle.

Listerine quickly checks halitosis because Listerine is an effective antiseptic and germicide★ which immediately strikes at the cause of odors. Furthermore, it is a powerful deodorant, capable of overcoming even the scent of onion and fish.

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★

Full strength Listerine is so safe it may be used in any body cavity, yet so powerful it kills even the stubborn B. Typhosus (typhoid) and Staphylococcus Aureus (pus) germs in 15 seconds.

LISTERINE

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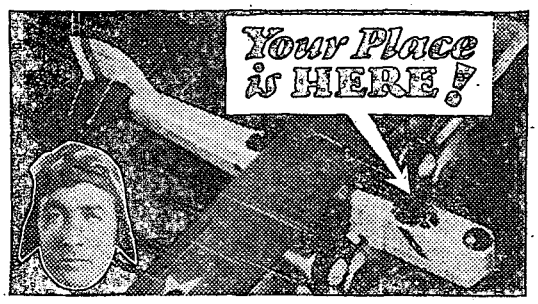

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A Magazine of Detective Stories

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By Carolyn Wells

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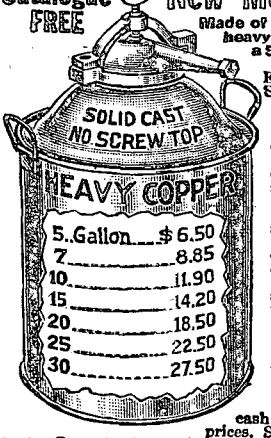

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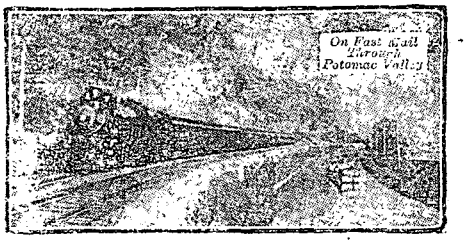

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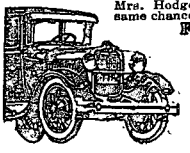

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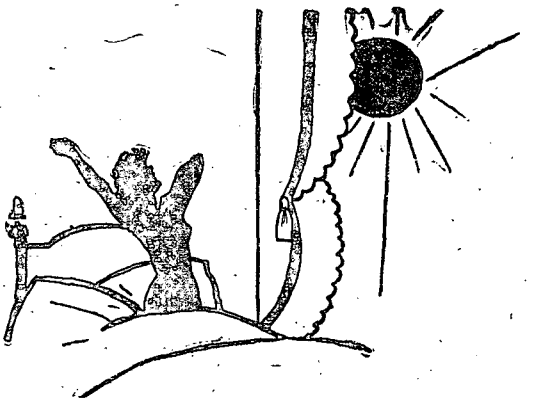

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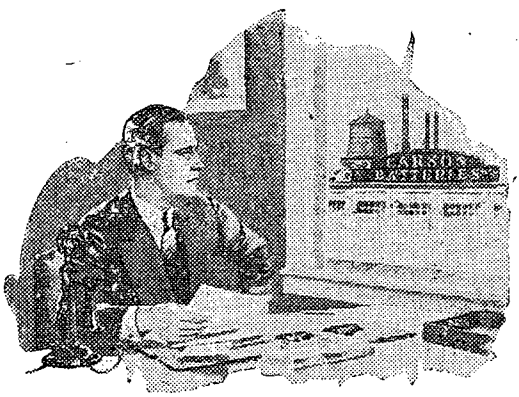

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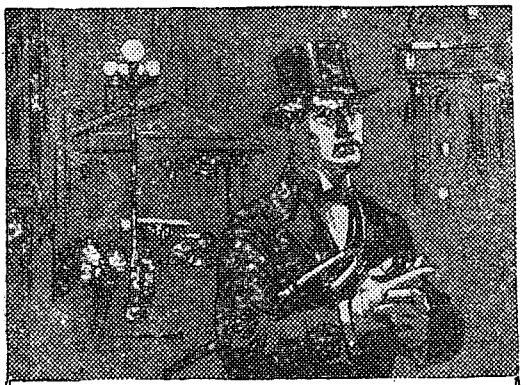

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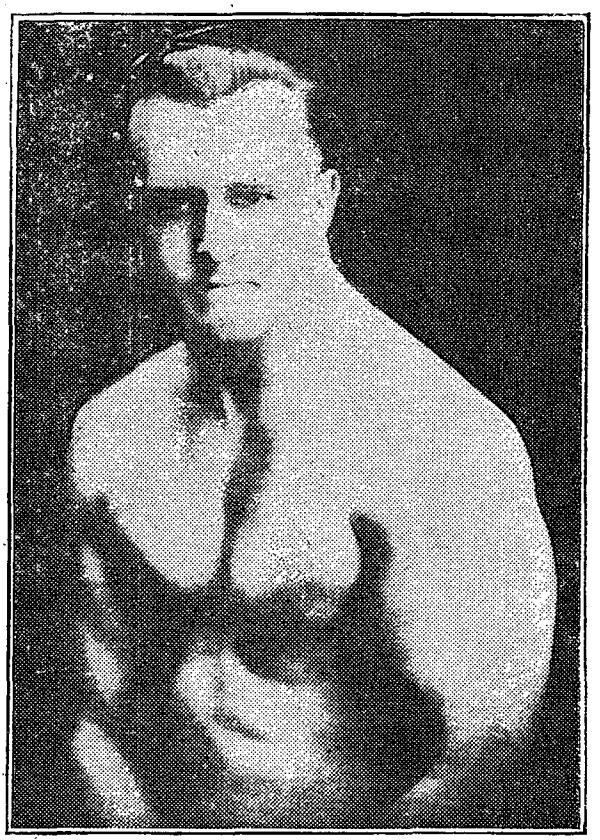

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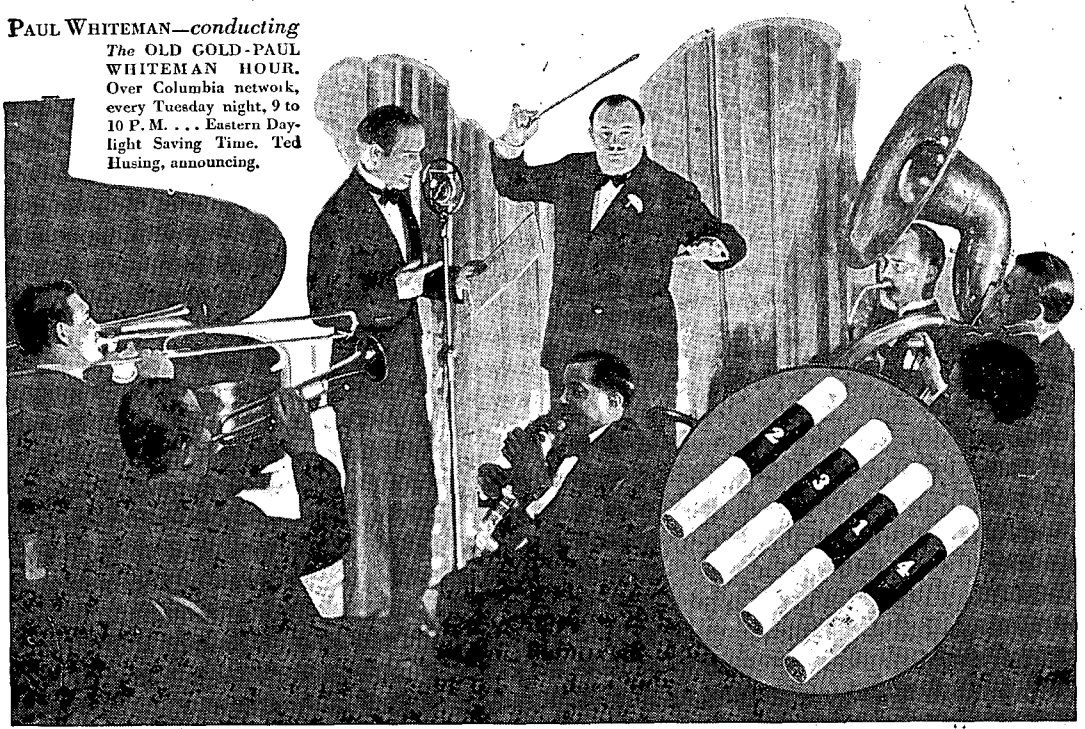
PAUL WHITEMAN—*conducting* *The* OLD GOLD-PAUL WHITEMAN HOUR. Over Columbia network, every Tuesday night, 9 to 10 P. M. . . . Eastern Daylight Saving Time. Ted Husing, announcing.



Part of Paul Whiteman's own 33-piece orchestra which the King of Jazz leads in every OLD GOLD Hour

Over the radio . . . Old Gold

Asks Nation to compare the 4 leading Cigarettes

Here are the first returns, as audited by certified public accountants

How 17,972 smokers voted

We certify that we have audited reports received from radio fans, showing how 17,972 smokers voted in comparing the 4 leading cigarettes, and that the following summary of the vote is correct.

	1st CHOICES	RESULT
OLD GOLD	8812	49%
Brand X	3879	22%
Brand Y	3103	17%
Brand Z	2178	12%
TOTAL	17,972	100%

(Signed) WIEGNER, ROCKEY & CO.
Accountants and Auditors

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Smoother and *Better* . . . "NOT A COUGH IN A CARLOAD"

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Good taste will always discover Camels

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